

Author
**Rin
Murakami**

Illustrator
**Mako
Tatekawa**

4

**GUIDE
TO THE
PERFECT
OTAKU
GIRLFRIEND**

**ROOMIES
AND
ROMANCE**





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1

“All this time, I’ve always looked up to strong, cool girls. I thought that if I ever fell in love with someone, it could only be with that kind of girl. Until now, that is. I’ve finally realized something. Ichigaya... you’re the person that I want to be with.”

It was my first time at Wonder Festival, yet all I could think about was Elena. She’d shocked me so much that I hadn’t been able to follow her after she’d hurried away.

The person she wants to be with... How am I supposed to forget about that?! She basically confessed her love to me!

Elena was a beautiful, kind, popular girl who worked as a voice actress and VTuber. She was on a totally different level to me in every single respect. How could she like *me*? I was equally surprised, doubtful, and... happy. If it were true, it was the best thing I could have ever asked for.

The girl was so far out of my league that the thought had never occurred to me, but she would have been an ideal girlfriend for any otaku... including me. The fact that she voiced VTuber Emily Saionji, who I loved, was part of it, but she was also beautiful, talented, and had a great personality. Even our tastes weren’t that different, since she liked yuri—which, for a girl, is somewhat rare. She checked every single box.

But then again, maybe she didn’t mean in a romantic sense.

Right before her first live performance, the news that Elena was the actress voicing Emily Saionji had leaked online, which had made her panic. Luckily, I was there to cheer her up, so maybe she’d said that without thinking because she was so grateful. She hadn’t told me that she loved me or anything—at least, not outright. That being said, it’d be weird not to think that she liked me after hearing something like that.

So, um... What am I supposed to do now?

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Ichigaya!”

Maybe if I tried to follow her...

“Hey! What are you spacing out for?”

“Your face got stuck, Icchi?”

“Huh? O-Oh, sorry,” I said, finally noticing that Kokoro, Iroha, and Mikoto had returned.

“We were just saying we should go get something to eat. You coming or what?” Kokoro asked.

“Y-Yeah...”

We went to one of the cafés inside the festival venue for lunch. The three girls were chatting, but I was so busy thinking about what Elena had said that the whole conversation went in one ear and out the other. Of course, they made fun of me every now and then for having my head in the clouds, but I couldn’t quite manage to pay attention.

“Has the heat been too much for you, Ichigaya? You’ve seemed rather absentminded all day,” Mikoto asked with concern. We were on a platform in the station, waiting for our trains.

“Oh, not at all! I’m sorry for making you worry. I’ve just got stuff on my mind, is all...”

“That’s good to hear, but make sure to get some rest, okay?”

“Of course, thank you.”

“A’ight, this is our train. It was cool to see you again!” Iroha said.

“See you two around!” Kokoro told her, waving her hand as Iroha and Mikoto boarded their train.

After splitting up with our former colleagues, Kokoro and I caught the train that would take us home.

“Hmmm, should I send him a message? An ‘it was nice meeting you’ kind of

thing? Or would that look too desperate?” Kokoro asked. She was still excited about having exchanged contacts with a handsome cosplayer at the festival.

I, however, still had something else on my mind.

“What’s the matter with you?! You’ve been out of it all afternoon!”

“O-Oh, sorry...” I replied.

I thought about telling her what had happened with Elena. That would certainly get Kokoro off my back, but... I couldn’t. If I told her, that meant I would have to explain that Elena had been there to thank me after I’d helped calm her down; which meant I’d have to explain that she’d been panicking about people finding out that she was a popular VTuber; which meant that I’d have to explain that Elena was *popular VTuber Emily Saionji*. Even though some people online had discovered her identity, it was still supposed to be a secret. I couldn’t tell Kokoro about it.

“What’s the matter? Did something happen back there?”

“No, not really...”

“Sheesh, fine. Keep your secrets. But tell me what you think! Do you think it’s fine to message him?”

“W-Well... if it’s just a greeting of sorts, then sure. I don’t see the problem.”

“Cool! Then I’ll do that now! Let’s see... *It was really nice meeting you today...* Okay! Sent! So, how did things go for you? Did you get to take pictures of any cute cosplayers? Did you get to speak to them?”

One of my reasons for attending the festival in the first place had been to meet cute cosplayers, but I’d forgotten all about that.

“Th-There was one that was cosplaying as a character I liked. I took a picture of her Twitter handle.”

To be honest, I no longer cared about that cosplayer. Elena was way more important to me.

“That’s awesome! You should follow her on Twitter and reply to one of her tweets or something. That’s, like, the reason you went through all this trouble, right?”

“Y-Yeah. I guess you’re right...”

Considering the day’s events, I suspected that I wouldn’t even bother to follow the girl.

Once we got home, I checked my phone again, but there was no message from Elena. I still didn’t know how to take what she’d said to me, but I didn’t have the gall to contact her myself. All I could do was give up for the day and go to bed.

* * *

The next day, I woke up to a LINE notification. I immediately slid my finger up the screen, hoping to see a message from Elena. To my surprise, the message had actually come from Kisaki, my little sister.

Kisaki had previously told me that she would be coming back home for summer vacation, and that she still hadn’t decided whether it was going to be a temporary thing or she was moving back to Japan permanently. If she settled on the latter, Kokoro wouldn’t be able to live here anymore, so I’d urged my sister to decide as soon as possible.

“I’ll be back home for around a week, starting on the 7th.”

“So you’re only staying here for summer vacation? And then you’ll go back?”

“That’s what I said.”

“I told you to tell me when you decided!”

“That’s what I’m doing!”

I sighed in relief. So it *was* just a temporary thing! I wouldn’t have to kick Kokoro out. That would have felt terrible after I’d been the one who’d offered her a place to stay.

Thinking about it, the idea of sharing the house with Kisaki was anything but thrilling. We’d gotten along with each other pretty well back when we were both kids, but when she entered middle school, we’d started growing apart and she’d started actively avoiding me.

Kisaki’s middle school debut had been nothing like mine: she’d started taking

care of her appearance, became extroverted and sociable, and, at least from what I'd heard, she'd also become popular with boys. Before that, we used to enjoy anime and games together, but she'd probably grown out of those hobbies altogether.

That's most likely why she didn't want anything to do with her unpopular otaku brother anymore. Of course, living with someone that acts so coldly toward you is stressful. I had a much better time with Kokoro as my roommate than with my own sister.

"...so she said she'll only be here for a week or so."

"Phew! That's a huuuge relief!"

Kokoro seemed even more relieved than I was. It made sense, considering that she had the most to lose: if Kisaki were to move back in, Kokoro would have to move away from Japan and go live with her parents overseas.

"It'll be from the seventh, so... do you think you can stay somewhere else for that time? Maybe at a friend's house..."

"I can't impose on my friends like that. I think I'll use my allowance and the money I saved from working to rent a cheap room. I'm sure I still don't have enough money though, so I'll probably have to, like, get another part-time job—one that pays daily or something."

"Sorry about that. Look, you don't have to pay your share of the house's expenses for this month..."

"For real? Thanks! Then I might be able to do it without working."

It turned out that Kisaki's visit wouldn't be that huge of a deal after all.

After dinner, Kokoro began searching for part-time jobs. She was disappointed to find that most of the ones that paid daily were warehouse or factory jobs that involved intensive manual labor.

"It's not looking good. Maybe I could sell some of the otaku merchandise and cosplay stuff I don't need anymore. I'd get some money out of it, even if not much. I have to take all of my things out of your sister's room before she gets

here anyway.”

“You can shove it in my room, as long as it fits. Kisaki wouldn’t go inside if her life depended on it, so there’s no risk of her finding any of it.”

“That makes it loads easier! But... you two are on really bad terms, huh?”

“Yeah, let’s not talk about that.”

Later in the morning, Kokoro left the house to meet up with some friends. Since I had no plans for the day, I decided I’d stay inside and enjoy some anime and games in the air-conditioned comfort of my home—the perfect way to spend summer vacation.

I was lying on the couch when I got a notification from Twitter. When I saw who the DM was from, I jumped up from the couch in surprise.

Mashiro@Meow’dMaidCafé

M-Mashiro?! And this handle... It’s her work account!

I’d previously told Mashiro that I wanted to talk things out, but she and I had never managed to exchange LINE contacts, and she’d deleted her private Twitter account—our only means of communication. I thought that she’d done that because she didn’t want to talk to me, so I’d given up hope of reconciliation. Then, when I ran into her at the café where Yume worked, she was inexplicably mad at me, and I couldn’t even find out why she hadn’t replied to my DMs.

At first, I’d thought she was mad at me because she was jealous of Yume, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized she was probably angry because I was getting close to another girl while still letting on that I was interested in her.

That seemed like the last nail in the coffin of our potential relationship, so why was she using her work account to message me?! The café strictly forbade maids from sending DMs to anyone with their work accounts.

What reason could she have to go against that rule? I asked myself as I opened the DM.

"Hello Ichigaya, it's Gojo Mashiro. Do you remember me?"

Remember her? What's she talking about? Does she really think I'd forget who she was in the span of a few days, or is she just being passive-aggressive?

"Of course I remember! I didn't expect a DM from your work account! What's the matter?"

There must be something she really needs to tell me...

"It's not that important, but... The other day, in the café, you asked me why I didn't reply to your DMs. I didn't manage to tell you then, so I'll give it another go. I wanted to. I wanted to reply, but I'd already deleted my Twitter... Once you delete it, the account stays up for a few days, and then it just disappears all of a sudden. By the time I'd come up with my reply, my account was gone."

So she'd actually wanted to reply! Now I finally knew... and she'd broken the café's rules just to tell me that...

"I see. That makes me feel better about it."

"I just didn't want there to be any misunderstanding. That's all."

"Okay. Thanks."

I laid down my phone, expecting that to be the end of it. All the confusion that had been running through my brain for such a long time was finally gone. After a few moments, however, Mashiro sent another message.

"That's all you have to say...?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

My confused reply was followed by an even longer wait. After about five minutes, I got another DM from Mashiro.

"Mashiro555"

It was her name, followed by some random numbers.

Wait... could this be...?

"That's my LINE ID. I'm not allowed to send DMs from this account, and I don't plan on making another private account for a while, so if you ever have anything to tell me, please use that."

It really was a LINE ID! Mashiro's LINE ID!

"Thanks! I'll add you as a friend!"

"Okay. Once you do, I'll delete all these DMs so that people at the café don't find out."

"Gotcha!"

I immediately opened up LINE and added Mashiro. I sent her a simple *"It's me, Ichigaya!"* and she replied with a sticker.

Staring at our brief exchange felt incredibly weird. I'd meant to ask for her LINE for so long, but never managed to. And now she'd given it to me, unprompted, at a time like this... I didn't have the slightest idea what was going on in her head.

I was happy to once again have a way to contact Mashiro, but I didn't really feel like having a conversation with her at that moment. That was probably because I'd been waiting for an answer from her for so long, and more importantly... because I still couldn't think about anything other than Elena.

2

The next morning, I received a LINE message from Yume.

“Good morning, Ichigaya! ≡ ≡ It’s so hot again today, isn’t it? Today I have an afternoon shift at the café. I hope you’ll visit me there again sometime!”

We were still messaging each other, but things were slightly different now. I knew that she would always reply to me immediately, no matter when I sent her something. If I did the same, we’d continue chatting for hours on end, so I made an effort to quit the conversation after a few exchanges.

She’d still text me again after a few days, like she had just done, so we never went that much time without talking to each other. Kokoro had warned me against getting Yume’s hopes up too much, but I also didn’t want to completely ignore her, so I was stuck sending her half-hearted replies while keeping a safe distance.

I wasn’t sure that keeping things like this was a good idea though. Yume was an incredibly cute girl who seemed to like me a lot. I was happy about that, of course, but I also couldn’t deny that I was somewhat scared of her.

“Are you up yet, Ichigaya?” I heard Kokoro ask as she knocked on my door.

“Yeah,” I said, lying on my bed, phone in hand.

Kokoro, still in her pajamas, opened the door. By her feet there were two cardboard boxes.

“I’ve started packing my stuff! Can I put these in your room?”

“Oh, sure.”

We only had about a week before Kisaki would arrive home, and I was starting to get nervous. I was relieved to see that Kokoro was already preparing for it.

“This is, like, just the tip of the iceberg though... I’m gonna go to Ikebukuro today to sell some of my doujinshi and cosplay stuff.”

“Do you think you’ll be able to clear the whole room in time?” I asked.

“Probably...” she replied, with very little confidence.

If she can’t do it on her own, I’ll have to help her...

For once, I actually had something to do outside of the house that day: I was meeting Ai in Akihabara so we could go to some otaku shops and the arcade. I was waiting at the Electric Town exit of Akihabara station when I heard his voice.

“Sorry to keep you waiting!”

“Oh, no pro—Huh?!”

I was temporarily at a loss for words. He looked... different. He was wearing a bobbed wig that reached his shoulders, a pink hoodie, and white hotpants. Long story short, he was dressed up as a girl. He looked sort of feminine to begin with, but this was full-on cross-dressing. I couldn’t stop staring at him.

“Wh-Why do you look like that?” I finally managed to mumble in his direction.

“How do I look? Do you think I can pass as a girl?” he asked me.

If you asked one hundred people, I was pretty sure that ninety-nine of them would think that he was a girl. And a cute girl at that.

“Y-Yeah, I think so, but... tell me in advance if you’re going to show up like that. I was shocked, you know?”

“Oh? What’s the matter, Kagetora? You’re worried you’ll fall in love with me?”

“Why would I ever do that?!”

As he walked closer to me, I noticed a pleasant smell drifting in my direction.
Did he put on women’s perfume?!

“Anyway, let’s go to the arcade!” Ai said. “I wanna play some rhythm games, claw cranes... and then we can take our picture in the purikura booths!”

“P-Purikura?! Are you serious?!”

“Of course! C’mon, I’ll pay for it!”

“O-Okay then...”

We went to the arcade, and Ai really did manage to coax me into taking purikura pictures with him. He even went so far as changing outfits for the photos—what kind of guy carries around a girl’s school uniform and a maid cosplay?! I suggested that he take some pictures by himself, but he got all offended for some reason and kept me with him for every one.

“You know, I love cosplaying, but dressing up in more ‘normal’ outfits like these is fun too!” he said.

He looked incredibly cute in every outfit that he tried on. When he moved closer to me to fit inside the frame, I couldn’t help but think about what I’d do if he really were a girl... I obviously kept all of these thoughts to myself, since Ai would only think I was a total creep.

Once we were done with the pictures, we played some rhythm games together, and then donated some of our money to the claw machines. We didn’t manage to snag anything, but trying to catch merchandise from our favorite games and anime was exciting enough.

Afterwards, we each bought a few goodies in one of the otaku shops and went to grab a bite to eat before calling it a day.

When I arrived back home I found the lights on, but Kokoro was nowhere to be seen. That mystery was solved when I heard the sound of the shower coming from the bathroom. I’d already told her that I’d be eating out with Ai.

I got comfortable on the couch and began my daily quests on my phone. After a while, I heard the bathroom door opening, so I turned around—the bathroom was behind the couch—to say hello to Kokoro.

“Hel...”

“...?!”

We stared at each other in a moment of terrified silence. Kokoro, who was standing right behind the couch—right in front of my eyes—was wearing nothing but her underwear.

“Eeeeeeeek?!” she screamed, her face flushing as red as a lobster in the

process of being boiled alive. “Wh-Why...?! Wh-When...?! Were you hiding?!”

“Why would I be *hiding*?! I was just lying down on the couch!”

Because the back of the couch had been in the way, Kokoro hadn’t been able to see me as she left the bathroom. She was now standing there, practically naked. I noticed that her breasts, covered only by a pastel-pink bra, were bigger than they’d always looked beneath her other clothes. Her waist, right above her matching pastel-pink panties, was also slimmer than I’d imagined. Her skin looked soft and fair and... *Why am I still staring at her?!*

Click!

“Huh?”

While both of us were still too confused to react, we heard the sound of a door opening.

Hm? What? But both Nishina and I are here... Who could that...?

Scared and confused, I looked toward the source of the noise.

“What...?”

A girl with a black bob was standing in the entrance with a shocked expression. A girl I knew very well. Her small stature had changed very little in the few months that I hadn’t seen her.

“Kisaki?”

“Who’s thaaat?!” Kokoro screeched as I stared, wide-eyed, at my sister.

“Wha... What’s going on here?” Kisaki asked, her eyes moving from me, to Kokoro, then back to me again.



* * *

“So... what’s going on?”

Kisaki, who was now sitting on a chair in front of us, was still shooting that same confused look back and forth from me to Kokoro.

“D-Didn’t you say you’d be back on the seventh? Why are you here already?!” I asked my sister. I’d assumed she would have at least told me about something so important.

“What gives you the right to complain about when I come back to my own home?! Ugh. Anyway, forget it. Tell me what the hell’s going on,” she said, barely able to hide her bewilderment.

“W-Well, okay... This is Nishina, a friend from school. Long story short, her parents moved overseas for work. She wanted to stay in Japan, so I let her stay here since we had a free room.”

“So she’s your girlfriend?”

“No!” Kokoro and I promptly yelled, though I could understand why she’d think that.

“We just go to the same school, that’s all. She was going through the same thing that I had, so I just wanted to help her out,” I said, trying my best to explain.

“Um, K-Kisaki, was it?” Kokoro asked. “I’m totally sorry! It was me who begged your brother to let me stay...”

Kokoro looked genuinely apologetic, and she was even lying to help me out. I was surprised she’d go so far, but grateful that she’d stick up for me.

“Why is my brother so stupid...? Anyway, I wasn’t able to get any sleep at all on that plane, so I’m going to my room to get some proper rest,” Kisaki said, sighing as she stood from her chair.

I was suddenly overwhelmed by fear, and I imagined the same applied to Kokoro.

“W-Wait! Why don’t you, er, go and take a bath first?” I suggested.

I'd invited a stranger to live in our house without telling my sister about it—that was bad enough. But if Kisaki found out that this stranger had been sleeping in her room, filling it with all kinds of unspeakable things, that would make the situation even worse. Much worse. Especially because Kisaki would be mad at *me*, the one who'd given the stranger permission to use that room.

Thankfully, Kokoro had already taken most of her belongings out of Kisaki's room, so maybe we could manage to make the rest disappear if we stalled for time.

"Ew, gross. Now you want to police your sister's bathing habits?" Kisaki said spitefully, continuing toward her room.

"B-But, Kisaki, w-wait...!"

Kokoro and I stumbled after her, unable to come up with anything that could convince her to stop. Step by step, Kisaki walked closer and closer to her room, stopped in front of it, and opened the door...

"...What?"

Here we go.

"Whose stuff is...? You let a *stranger* stay in my room?!"

"I-I'm so sorry, Kisaki!" I said.

"I'm sorry too!" Kokoro followed, sounding like she was on the verge of tears.

"Unbe-freaking-lievable!" Kisaki shouted, letting her luggage fall to the floor. She seemed too angry to move.

Kokoro and I lowered our heads apologetically, unable to think of a way to calm her down.

"You let a girl from school live in our house without asking Mom and Dad... and you let her use *my* room! Are you kidding me?!"

"I'm really, really sorry..." I said, too scared to look her in the eye.

"I'm telling Mom and Dad right now!"

Anything but that! I thought, so shocked that I finally raised my head to look at my sister.

“Don’t you even—wait... I-Is this...?” Kisasi was staring down at a pile of doujinshi that Kokoro had left in a paper bag on the floor. She slowly leaned down and pulled out the copy at the top of the pile, barely blinking as she stared at the cover.

“A limited edition Fromage doujinshi? The one that was never sold online and never got a reprint!”



I'd never seen Kisasi like this before. She was suddenly excited, her eyes practically sparkling, yet I had no idea what she was talking about.

"Y-You like BL doujinshi?" Kokoro asked.

"I-I mean... This is yours? *You're* an otaku?"

"Ah, yeah! Most of the stuff in here is actually otaku merchandise. I didn't know you were an otaku too, Kisasi! Ichigaya, why didn't you tell me?"

"Huh? This is news to me too..."

Kisasi... an otaku? A BL-doujinshi-reading otaku? That can't be true!

Back when she was still a kid, we used to enjoy loads of anime and games together, but I'd have hardly called her an otaku, even back then. I thought she'd grown out of all those things around when she'd started middle school.

"And... are these all HypMic doujinshi?" Kisasi asked, gesturing toward the paper bag.

"Yep! I used to have, like, twice as many, but I sold a bunch of them the other day..."

"Sold them? But why would you do something like that?"

"Well, you know, I had to clear out your room."

"I wish I could have read them before you sold them. Um... would you mind if I took a look at the doujinshi you have here? Just a quick glance?"

"Sure, go ahead! You can totally read them! But, uh, if you recognized the cover so fast, does that mean you're a Toppo fan?!"

"God, yes! I love Toppo!"

"Wow, no freakin' way! Me too! I've never met another Toppo fan in real life!"

"Me neither! You're just so... pretty that you don't look like the type to enjoy BL doujinshi..."

"I was just thinking the same thing about you! Actually, if you want, you can read anything here! I know it's not enough of an apology for moving into your

room and all, but...”

“I’d say it’s more than enough... Wow! Look at this! I saw a sample of this one on Pixiv and I’ve wanted to read it ever since! And this one too! I couldn’t get any of this stuff in India... Who’d have thought I’d have so many HypMic doujinshi waiting for me as soon as I came back to Japan?!”

Can someone explain to me what’s going on? Kisaki... is a fujoshi? She’s befriending Nishina?

“K-Kisaki, I thought you weren’t into anime, games, or any of that stuff anymore... but you’re an otaku? And a fujoshi at that?”

“So what if I am?! It’s none of *your* business! Why are you still here anyway? Stop being such a freak!”

“Huh?!”

“Oh, I totally get you!” Kokoro added. “Having your family see you reading smut must be the worst. Go on, Ichigaya, get out!”

“Wh-What?”

I was given a forceful shove, then Kisaki slammed the door shut behind me. I could still hear the two girls’ voices coming from the inside.

“Whoa, you have this one too!”

“You’ve sooo gotta read it. It’s super hot!”

“W-Wait, is it a naughty one? You can buy those?!”

“Oh, and this one’s totally the best!”

All that, along with other such questionable things. I was at least relieved to hear that Kisaki wasn’t angry anymore.

I still can’t believe she’s an otaku though. A pretty hardcore one too. I thought she’d strayed from the otaku lifestyle when she started hanging out with the cool kids in middle school, but what I just saw means she’s been hiding her real hobbies from me all along...

However, this left me with another important question: why had she started hating me so much? If she really was an otaku like me, she had no reason to

hate me for being one too. Maybe she was angry that I didn't make any effort to pass myself off as a presentable, well-groomed human being like she did. Whatever the case, I could barely keep up with all this, so I decided to let the girls have their fun together and rest my head for a little while.

Even later, when it was time to sleep, I could still hear them talking. Did they plan on staying up all night giggling about BL? And how could two people want to spend so much time together after having just met?

3

The next morning, after eating breakfast, I went down to the living room. Kisaki and Kokoro were nowhere to be seen, so I started playing with my phone. I imagined they were still in my sister's room, but they didn't show up at all, no matter how long I waited.

At around noon, I began to worry about them, so I went up to Kisaki's room and knocked on the door.

"Hey, you two! It's past twelve already!" I said.

After a while, the door opened, revealing a sleepy Kokoro in her pajamas. Behind her, I could see Kisaki still passed out in her bed.

"Really? Dang... We spent the whole night chatting and reading doujinshi together and then ended up going to bed at like seven in the morning..." Kokoro explained, holding back a yawn.

"You really get along well for two people who just met yesterday."

"You don't get it! It's like she's the sister I was separated from at birth or something! We have similar tastes in everything, we ship the same couples. It was *the* best, I swear! We had so much fun!"

Kisaki, woken up by our conversation, sat up on the bed with a big yawn.

"...Oh, good morning, Kokoro," she said.

You greet her and not your own brother?! And you're already on a first-name basis with her?!

"Good morning, Kisaki!" Kokoro replied. "Totally sorry I ended up crashing in your bed last night. That must have been super uncomfortable for you. Don't worry though, I'm gonna get a hotel room today, and I'll put all my stuff in your brother's room."

They slept together?!

"A hotel?! No, there's no need to spend all that money! You can just stay in

my room!” Kisasi said, much to my surprise. Sure, they liked each other, but this defied all expectations.

“I couldn’t! That’d be, like, waaay too much to ask!”

“No, really! And you can leave your stuff in here too! Actually, if possible, I’d prefer if you did. Th-There are some more doujinshi in here that I’d like to take a look at...”

“I don’t mind lending you them and all, but wouldn’t it be hard to relax with a stranger around?”

“Not at all! I’d rather you be here than having to be all alone with *Kagetora*. Ugh.”

Hey! I’m right here! And I have feelings too! I thought. Aside from the insults though, I actually agreed. Having Kokoro around would probably make things less awkward with Kisasi.

“R-Really? If you insist...”

“Yay!” Kisasi grinned.

“To be honest, this works out loads better for me! Staying in a hotel would have cost a fortune.”

And thus, Kokoro was able to remain my roommate while Kisasi was back in Japan. I didn’t even have to deal with my sister’s anger, which was a relief. But I was ultimately surprised that, after treating me so coldly for so many years, Kisasi would be so friendly with Kokoro.

* * *

Later that day, Kokoro cooked up lunch—which I guess was breakfast for the two girls—with the stuff we had left in the fridge. We all sat down and ate together.

“Wow, this is so good! You’re amazing, Kokoro!” Kisasi said after taking a bite.

“Oh, come on! You’re flattering me!”

“No, really! Even though you’re an otaku, you’re gorgeous, attractive, all your clothes are so cute, *and* you’re a great cook!”

Once again, I felt confused and somewhat sad that Kisaaki would have so much admiration for my roommate. Kokoro was just as much of an otaku as I was, yet Kisaaki hated me. Other than the fact that their tastes were so similar, this definitely had to be because of how well Kokoro took care of herself. Kisaaki probably respected her as a girl *and* as an otaku.

“Still, you know, even though we had a free room here, I’m surprised you decided to stay with someone like *him*,” Kisaaki said, pronouncing the last word with enough contempt to hurt my feelings again. “You’d never guess the two of you would have anything to do with each other. Were you friends to begin with?”

“Not really,” Kokoro replied. “We got to know each other because we had the same, um, goal in mind.”

“Goal? What kind of goal?”

“It’s okay to tell her, right?” Kokoro asked me.

“Sure, go ahead.” We didn’t really have any reason not to tell Kisaaki, and hiding the truth would just make her suspicious.

“You see, we both want to find an otaku date. So he’s helping me look for a boyfriend, and I’m helping him look for his otaku dream girl.”

“D-Date?!” Kisaaki asked, her jaw stuck open in disbelief. “My brother’s looking for a girlfriend?”

She took a short pause to give me the kind of look that you’d give a filthy toilet.

“Ew...” she then said.

“What?!” I exclaimed, offended by my sister’s reaction. “What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“So that’s why you two ended up living together?” Kisaaki asked, as if I’d said nothing.

“Right after we decided to help each other out, my parents told me I had to move overseas with them,” Kokoro began to explain. “I didn’t wanna leave Japan, because that’d have meant being away from otaku culture. But they

were all *'a girl your age can't stay here by herself.'* Y'know? Ichigaya was there at the time, and he told my dad I could stay here. I totally didn't see that coming, but I'm super grateful he did it. My dad is kind of... weird, you see. He's really into the whole romance thing. So we had to lie, but when we told him we were dating, he let me stay."

"Wow! I can't believe that worked!"

"But like, the only problem is that when my mom and dad come back to Japan, they expect your brother and me to get married..."

"M-Married?!" Kisaki shouted. "Are you two really going to—?!"

"No way!" Kokoro and I yelled in unison, cutting her off.

"We just figured that if we both found something super serious by the time my parents are back, we could convince them to forget about the whole marriage thing."

"That sure is a lot to take in... I'm surprised your parents didn't try to stop you from marrying someone like my brother," Kisaki said.

Huh?!

"Well, Mom and Dad think it's fine to marry whoever you like, as long as you're happy with them," Kokoro replied.

HUH?!

I was so offended that I didn't have enough strength left to interject. But with our situation finally explained, Kisaki changed the topic.

"By the way, are you going to Comiket?" she asked Kokoro.

"I'm planning to! There's a bunch of doujinshi I wanna buy! Oh, and, when your brother and I went to WonFes, I met this super handsome Toppo cosplayer... and he's gonna be at Comiket, so I really wanna see him there! Awaah! It'll actually be my first time there, so I'd be way too scared going alone, but..." Kokoro turned to look at me. "You're going too, aren't you?"

"Y-Yeah, I guess I am..." I replied. I'd also been planning on going, so I figured I might as well go with Kokoro.

“Did you say ‘super handsome *Toppo* cosplayer’?”

“Sure did! Wait, I have pictures! Here, this guy,” Kokoro said, showing Kisaki her phone.

“Woow! He’s so cool! You said you’re looking for a boyfriend, so are you trying to go out with him?” my sister asked, practically bouncing in her seat.

“W-Well, it’s not like I’m going to ask him out or anything, but... I thought it’d be nice to see him again and maybe cosplay together or something!” Kokoro replied, just as excitedly. She was probably too embarrassed to outright admit that she wanted to date him, but her reaction made it pretty clear.

“What about you, Kisaki? Do you wanna go?” Kokoro asked.

“Oh, er, yes. Well, to be honest... I’m going to have a booth there.”

“Your own booth?!” Kokoro shrieked.

I was just as shocked. *First I learn that my sister is actually an otaku, and now she’s going to have a booth at Comiket?!*

“You draw doujinshi?!” I asked.

“Y-Yeah...” she reluctantly replied.

“Were you doing that when you still lived here?” If she was, then she’d been pretty good at hiding it.

“I’ve been uploading my art online for a while, but I’ve never sold physical copies before. Last winter, I also reserved a booth, but then I had to move to India. I kept posting my work online from there though.”

“So you came back to go to Comiket?” Kokoro asked.

“Well, I also want to see my friends, go shopping, and stuff like that, but Comiket is the main reason, yeah.”

“You’re still in middle school and you sell your own doujinshi?! That’s awesome! What characters do you base them on? HypMic ones? Toppo?”

“Y-Yes...”

“I knew it! Awww, I really wanna buy it! Would you show me your drawings? Please?”

She doesn't just read BL... My sister draws BL.

"I-I'm not that good though! But if you really want to see, well..." Kiseki handed her phone to Kokoro, probably showing one of her drawings.

"Not that good?! You're amazing! Wow, this is so cute! Aaaaah!"

How good are they? I kinda want to see them too... I thought. My eyes met with my sister's, but she puffed out her cheeks in annoyance and looked away.

She'd never show them to me... Still, I can hardly believe it. Kiseki became a huge otaku, maybe even more so than me! Didn't she say she was uploading her stuff while she was away? At least she has the internet over there...

Not only had my sister been hiding her hobbies from me all this time, but we were eating and chatting together at the same table. Everything was so weird. Back when we'd lived together, we'd almost never spoken to each other.

"If you're going to Comiket, I can give you a circle ticket," Kiseki offered. To Kokoro, of course.

Circle tickets... I'd never drawn a doujinshi in my life, but even I had heard of these mysterious artifacts. Doujinshi artists usually publish their work through their "circles," and the circles that participate in Comiket are given these special tickets. It's said that the owner of one may enter the Comiket venue before all normal visitors do.

"Are you freakin' kidding me?! That'd be so awesome! Would you really do that?" Kokoro asked.

"Sure. I don't have anyone helping me sell my stuff, so I have no one to give my extra tickets to anyway."

"Really? But doesn't that mean you're going there by yourself? Isn't that a bit... dangerous? Don't you have any friends you can ask to come and help you out?!"

As soon as she heard Kokoro's question, Kiseki's face flooded with gloom and depression.

"Actually, I don't have any otaku friends. Some of my classmates here used to watch anime, but that's about it. I was too scared to ever tell anyone that I'm a

fujoshi...”

So she wasn't only hiding it at home, but at school too. But, er, why does this story sound so familiar?

“It’s the *exact* same for me! I’m, like, hiding my power level at school, so you’re the first person I’ve ever talked to about BL in real life!”

“Really?! You’re the first person for me too! I can only talk about my favorite ships online, you know?”

The two girls, having discovered yet another commonality between them, began to chat more and more excitedly.

“What do you say I help you with your booth? As thanks for the circle ticket! It’s not safe for a middle schooler to go to Comiket by herself, you know? And you could go see the rest of the venue while I handle the sales stuff for you!”

“R-Really?! That’d be a huge help! I’d love to buy a ton of doujinshi myself, but I’d given up on that because I thought I wouldn’t have the time to leave my booth!”

“May I ask how many circle tickets you have?”

“Three, including mine.”

“I see. What are you gonna do with the one that’s left over?”

“Pfft, I don’t know.”

“Then what about having Ichigaya come help with the booth too?”

“Huh?!” I exclaimed.

Having a circle ticket would be nice, sure, but... helping Kisaki sell doujinshi? BL doujinshi?!

“H-Him...?”

“Wouldn’t it be real unsafe for two cute girls to stand alone behind a booth? Having a guy there would be loads better. And if he’s helping out too, we can totally take shifts so we have even more time to buy doujinshi together!”

Did she just call herself cute? I mean, it’s no lie, but... Anyway, Nishina’s planning to use me so she can have more time to run around Comiket, isn’t

she?! That being said, if I could get my hands on a circle ticket in return... that'd be a fair tradeoff.

After lining up with the normal Comiket visitors last year, the thought of hell no longer scared me—it was preferable to waiting an eternity in the scorching heat while surrounded by other suffering souls. Sitting behind a booth selling doujinshi would definitely be better than that, and if there were three of us, I'd have plenty of time to go shopping myself.

However, even if I was fine with it, I doubted Kisasi would agree. Having your own older brother help you sell BL doujinshi was probably too awkward to even consider.

"N-No way! It's *BL* drawn by his little sister... He'd never do that... right?" Kisasi asked, confused, taking a quick glance at me before looking away. I was surprised to see that, more than she disliked the idea, she was worried that I'd be the one to turn it down.

"Why not?" Kokoro said. "He doesn't mind BL at all. He's even been playing a BL game I recommended to him."

"You... played a BL game?" Kisasi asked me in utter shock.

"It's not like I was interested in it! Nishina just told me I should learn about that kind of thing if I want to date an otaku girl..."

"Ohhh... So you did play it then. That's surprising," Kisasi said, screwing up her face like she was creeped out.

Agh, great, now she thinks I'm a closet BL fan...

"You don't mind helping your own sister out if it means getting a circle ticket, do you?" Kokoro asked me. "Maybe you could even meet some girls there! You could meet a cute doujinshi artist, or like, a cute cosplayer selling stuff at another booth!"

"I-I was planning to go either way, so I'd definitely help out in exchange for a circle ticket."

Truth to be told, lately, I'd been so busy thinking about what Elena had told me that I hadn't even considered the possibility of meeting girls at Comiket.

“Y-You would?!” my sister asked *before* I could ask *her* if she was fine with it.
“B-but don’t you ever, *ever* read my doujinshi, okay?!”

Does this mean she’s agreeing to it?

“Of course, I’d never do that without permission.”

“It’s all decided then!” Kokoro grinned.

That sure was enough surprises for one day. Not only did my little sister draw BL doujinshi, but we were also going to help her sell them at Comiket. The most shocking thing, however, was that she’d let me come and even given me one of her precious circle tickets. I knew how much Kisaki hated me. Had Kokoro not been there, none of this would have happened. If it wasn’t for her, Kisaki and I probably wouldn’t have even talked much to begin with. After all, we only used to speak to each other when strictly necessary...

* * *

Later that morning, Kisaki left the house to meet up with some friends that she hadn’t seen in a while. She said she’d also buy the things she needed for Comiket on her way back and explained—to Kokoro, not to me—that she’d already turned in the doujinshi she would be selling at the event. My sister now only needed to prepare the booth and the free pamphlets she wanted to hand out there.

Kokoro was sitting on the couch looking at her phone while I washed the dishes left from breakfast.

“Oh, oh! Minami’s gonna be at Comiket too! She just replied to me on LINE. It’s not gonna be for work either; she said she just wants to buy some books.”

The mention of Elena’s name took me by surprise and left me dumbfounded for a second.

“I, like, told her your sister’s gonna be there with a booth and that the two of us get to help her. Telling Minami was fine, right?”

“Huh?! O-Oh, sure. What did she say back?”

“She said to tell her when we know where our booth will be so she can come visit!”

“I-I see...”

This was going to be my first time seeing Elena since *that incident*. Since she said that she’d come despite knowing that I’d be there, I’d possibly just been worrying too much. Maybe she didn’t even consider what had happened to be that much of an incident at all.

“By the way, did you hear? Minami’s actually, like, doing some awesome stuff in secret!” Kokoro said.

Awesome stuff? Voice acting is awesome enough, but... could this be about her voicing Emily Saionji?

“I might know what you mean...” I said. “But I’m not exactly sure which part you’re talking about.” I tried to keep my answer as generic as possible. Although the truth about Elena’s secret career had already been leaked online, I didn’t know whether it’d be fine for me to tell Kokoro about it.

I’d finished washing the dishes, so I joined Kokoro in the living room and took a seat in front of her.

“You mean the VTuber thing, don’t you?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she replied. “So you already knew about it too, huh? It’s literally *everywhere* online at the minute.”

So she did find out... The leak has already spread across a ton of different sites, so it was only a matter of time.

“Uh-huh...” I nodded, hoping that she’d assume that I’d also found out about it from the internet.

“I mean, being a voice actress is cool enough, right? But she’s also a super famous VTuber! I’d already heard of Emily Saionji before I found out, and then I tried watching her videos, right? And her voice is just like Minami’s. She’s just as cute as well, *and* she loves yuri! It’s like Minami’s been made all virtual or something!”

“Yeah, it really is...”

As it turned out, I wasn’t the only one to think that Elena wasn’t just voicing Emily Saionji... Elena *was* Emily Saionji.

“Oh, apart from that, I meant to ask you about how things went with that cute cosplayer you managed to take pictures of last time!”

“Well...”

I did take pictures and take note of her Twitter handle, but I hadn’t even bothered to follow her. I was still too busy thinking about Elena to care about some random cosplayer.

“Things haven’t gone anywhere, to be honest,” I replied.

“What a total waste! You got the camera and practiced taking pictures and everything!”

She had a point, but I couldn’t bring myself to flirt with other girls while I still didn’t know what Elena really thought.

“Anyway,” I said, remembering that there was still something that I had to ask Kokoro about. “What about you? How’s it going with that guy we saw at WonFes?”

“Hmmm, I haven’t really spoken with him since then. I check his Twitter every day, but I can’t work up the courage to reply to anything, you know?”

“Oh, wait, so you know his Twitter? Then you can see what kind of person he is around other people. Does he give off those same sleazy vibes that Bambi did?”

“Not in the slightest! Literally no sleaziness!”

“Really? A guy that handsome, cosplaying a character so popular with girls... and he isn’t even *a bit* sleazy?”

After all that had happened with Bambi—creepy, narcissistic, pretty-faced cosplayer Bambi—I was pretty skeptical of all handsome cosplayers, and Kokoro could have used some of that skepticism herself.

“If you don’t believe me, here, see for yourself!” she said, shoving her phone under my nose to show me the profile of the guy in question: Yuya. That was his nickname on Twitter, at least.

The bio, other than stating that he was just a beginner cosplayer, included a list of the characters he cosplayed and series that he liked. His icon was a selfie

of him dressed as Toppo from HypMic, the same cosplay we'd seen him wearing at Wonder Festival. He looked just as attractive in his picture as he did in real life.

The dude had less than a hundred follows and a few hundred followers—between this and the fact that his account was only four months old, he probably really was a beginner. His pinned tweet was more of the same: a self-introduction with a couple of cosplay pictures, featuring more Toppo as well as Merlin from *FGO*.

In general, he mostly tweeted about gacha games and other otaku stuff, his life at university, and his part-time job. Except for the occasional rant about this or that, he didn't look like a bad guy. More importantly, I could tell that he wasn't just pretending to be an otaku—he really was one.

What weirded me out a little bit were the tweets about the basketball club he was part of at university. Sport clubs were things that cool people joined.

An otaku and cool? I thought you could only choose to be one of those. There's no way someone that lucky isn't a womanizer...

Next, I checked the "Tweets and Replies" tab. I was sure I'd see tons of messages sent out indiscriminately to a bunch of different girls... but I was wrong.

The few accounts that he was replying to regularly all seemed to belong to men. I had to scroll down quite a way before finding a reply he'd sent to a girl. It wasn't even that interesting of an exchange: the girl was thanking him for letting her take his picture, and he'd simply replied thanking her and saying that he'd followed her account back. That was the end of the conversation.

"He doesn't look sleazy at all..." I said.

I didn't know how he acted offline, but from what I could gauge from his Twitter account, he seemed to be a decent human being. Handsome, an otaku, cool, *and* a decent person? Huh.

"Right?! See, what did I tell you?! He isn't dodgy at all!" Kokoro grinned.

Not only did he not look like a bad guy, but he even looked like the kind of guy I could be friends with. At least, he liked the same anime and games as I did. Of

course, you couldn't tell everything about a person just from how they acted on Twitter, but I had no reason to ask Kokoro to stop involving herself with him at this stage.

"Yeah, I guess so..."

"His account looks nothing like Bambi's! He almost never messages girls, and I don't get any fishy vibes from him!" Kokoro said.

Does this mean that she did get fishy vibes from Bambi?

"And you're going to meet up with him at Comiket, right?" I asked her.

"Well, kinda. Since I know he's going, I'll check his Twitter while we're there and try to find him."

"Huh? You mean you haven't even asked him?! You'll 'try to find him'?!"

"Y-Yeah... We're not so close that I can ask him to meet up with me just yet!"

"This is Comiket we're talking about! You aren't going to message him at all? You're never going to find someone in that crowd just from reading their tweets! No, no, that's impossible. Just so you know, there are usually so many people around that you can't even get reception on your phone."

I'd gone to Comiket with Ai the previous year. Finding each other after splitting up had been anything but easy.

"I-Is it really that bad?" she asked, shocked.

"Of course. You follow each other already, so just send him a message saying that you want to take a picture of his cosplay or something."

"What?! No way! I've only ever messaged him, like, one time!"

"Then it's the perfect opportunity to fix that!"

"B-But... wouldn't that be way too full-on? We only met each other once!"

"It's not like you're asking him to cosplay with you or anything. What's so bad about asking for a picture?"

"Well... I guess you're right."

Looking convinced but nervous, Kokoro began tapping away on her phone.

After running the message by me, she sent it there and then.

“There, I did it! But what if he doesn’t reply?! I mean, he has a ton of followers, and back at the event there were loads of other girls asking for pictures. Maybe he doesn’t even remember me.”

I doubted anyone would forget her, considering how cute that cosplay of hers had looked. Not that I’d admit that to her face.

“Now that I think about it, are you planning on cosplaying at Comiket?” I asked.

“Hm? That’s the plan, yeah. But I still wanna focus on helping Kisaki sell her doujinshi and then shop for the ones I want myself.”

“I just thought that if he saw you cosplaying again that’d make you more memorable to him, whether or not he already remembers you. Since he’s so handsome, you’re probably going to have a lot of competition to take his picture.”

“Oh, good point! Maybe I should do a HypMic cosplay too then. It’d fit with Kisaki’s booth, and if he’s doing Toppo again, we could even get a picture together! Maybe I could cross-dress as Lamta... But Kisaki’s doujinshi are about Toppo, so that might be kinda weird...”

While Kokoro was going on about her cosplaying plans, I also thought about what her best option would be. Cosplaying the same series would be fun and a good way to get a picture with him, but...

“I think you’d better cosplay something else,” I said.

“What? Why?”

“Even if it’s a cute cosplay, you’d still be cross-dressing. If you want to impress a guy, I think you’d have a much better chance cosplaying as a girl.”

“A-Are you sure?”

“Yeah. On his Twitter it says he likes Arimu from *IMS*. Maybe you could cosplay her.”

“You’re right, it does say that! I guess that’s what an otaku guy would want... Okay! I think Arimu’s cute too, so I’ll cosplay her!”

Immediately convinced by what I'd said, Kokoro started to look for reference pictures on her phone, hemming and hawing about whether her cosplay should feature Arimu's normal clothes or her maid outfit.

That's some fast decision-making as usual...

"Oh," she then said, "but if I'm cosplaying a character who's, like, unrelated to the doujinshi we're selling, maybe I should ask Kisaki."

"Nah, it'll be fine."

"You think so? I still need to decide what to wear apart from the cosplay though..."

"What do you mean?"

"Like, say that Yuya and I become friends during Comiket and decide to go have dinner together after or something. I should be ready for that!"

She doesn't even know whether she'll be able to find the guy, yet she's already preparing what she'll wear to dinner with him?!

"Since I'll be wearing a wig and all, I'll also have to fix my hair when I take it off! I need, like, a portable hair iron..." she said.

I mean, sure, I can imagine wearing a wig would ruffle your hair up a bit, but...

"So, what do *you* think?" Kokoro asked. "What should I wear?"

She was staring at me with puppy-dog eyes, practically begging me for an answer. Kokoro had obviously come to trust me and my opinion when it came to the tastes of male otaku.

Summer clothing that an otaku would like...?

"There's only one choice, now that I think about it... A white sundress!" I told her.

Can't go wrong with a white sundress. All otaku love those. I think.

"What...? That's all? Something so simple?"

"Yeah. Look at how the heroines in anime and games dress in the summer. Lots of white sundresses, right? I'm a hundred percent positive that I'm not the only one who appreciates that."

“I see... That’d be comfortable at least. I don’t have one, but I’m going to Shibuya with some friends later today, so I’ll try finding one there.”

So she’s going out... Am I the only one spending the whole summer at home? Not that I’d prefer being outside, but...

“Eeeeeek!” Kokoro squealed out of nowhere, almost dropping her phone. “He replied!”

“Well, that was fast. What did he say?”

“Um, he said ‘you’re going to Comiket too? I’d love to meet you there! Are you going to cosplay?’” she read, making no attempt to conceal her excitement.

“Oh, that should make you happy, right?”

“Of course! He agreed to meeting me, and he even asked about me, so... I have a chance, don’t I?!” she shrieked.

“He sounds like he wants to be friends with you, yeah...”

“He does, doesn’t he?! He really does! Awaaaah! What now?! How do I reply?!”

“Anything! Just don’t let the conversation end! And you’d better talk about how you’re going to meet up that day so you can actually find him,” I said, trying to put myself in the guy’s shoes. If a girl stopped a conversation there, I’d assume she wasn’t particularly interested in me.

“O-Okay! Oh, snap! I have to leave soon! I’ll reply to him while I’m on the train!”

With that, Kokoro hurriedly got herself ready and left the house.

I can’t be certain, but this sounds like it’s going to end better than it did with Bambi—this Yuya guy seems pretty decent. That being said, all we know about him is what we read on his Twitter page, so it’s probably safer to be cautious here. After all, handsome male cosplayers, by nature, are used to being surrounded by girls. More often than not, they play around a lot.

Nishina’s too excited to see straight. I’ll have to check out this guy myself... for her sake, obviously.

4

Left alone at home, I cleaned my room before relaxing with my usual otaku stuff, which mainly involved watching VTuber videos and playing gacha games on my phone. It was my turn to make dinner, but Kokoro had told me she would be eating while she was out, and I had no idea when Kisaki would be back. So, instead of cooking, I ordered some gyudon for delivery.

At around eight, just as I was tucking into my cheap meal of beef and rice, I heard someone walk through the front door. It was too early for Kokoro to be back, so it could only be...

“Hey.”

“O-Oh, Kisaki...”

This was the first time my sister and I had been alone together since she’d come back to Japan. Thanks to Kokoro, we’d actually talked to each other more than we ever used to, but I still felt awkward around her. It was hard to believe that we used to play together so much as kids.

Should I go back to my room? Maybe it’s fine to stay though. I was here first, and she’ll probably go straight to her room so she doesn’t have to hang around me...

Kisaki silently walked to the fridge and poured herself a glass of Kokoro’s homemade barley tea. Glass in hand, she then headed into the living room and took a seat on the chair in front of the couch, where I was sitting.

Huh? I thought she’d avoid me and rush to her room...

She started sipping her tea while looking at her phone.

I-Is she going to just... stay here? Doesn’t it bother her to be alone with me? B-But this is so awkward! This is the first time in forever that we’ve sat so close to each other without someone else in the room!

I couldn’t stand the silence any longer, so I tried to think of a topic to start a

conversation. Then at least she couldn't accuse me of being rude.

This wouldn't have happened if Nishina were here! Why am I even worrying about being polite to my sister anyway? How stupid is that?!

"So, K-Kisaki... You were an otaku all along, huh? I thought you'd stopped liking all that stuff when you started middle school."

This was probably the best time to ask her about what had been on my mind for a while, but I was worried that bringing it up out of nowhere had come across as a bit weird.

"S-So what? What do you care?" she replied, making me immediately regret speaking to her.

"It's just that, you know, you went with Mom and Dad to India without complaining or anything, even though it's so hard to get hold of otaku stuff there."

"I obviously didn't want to leave my hobbies behind... but family is supposed to stay together," she murmured.

That last part was so surprising coming from her that I didn't know how to reply.

"But you..." she continued, her voice lowered to practically a whisper.

"Me...?"

"...No, it's nothing."

"Huh? Wh-What is it?"

How could I not be curious after she stopped mid-sentence like that?

"Anyway," she said, changing the topic, "I still can't believe that a girl that pretty is a friend of *yours*, and that she's an otaku, to top it off."

"Excuse me?!"

"You never made friends with girls before."

"U-Uh..."

That was true, and I'd only become friends with Kokoro by coincidence. If we

hadn't run into each other at that party, I probably *still* wouldn't have any female friends. Spending time with her was also what got me kind of used to girls, at least to the point where I'd managed to speak to Elena. I'd only met the other girls I knew right now—Mashiro, Yume, Iroha, and Mikoto—because Kokoro had convinced me to go to more events and take on a part-time job with her.

Now that Kisasi mentioned it, I realized that all of this would have been unthinkable for me just a few years ago, and it was probably all thanks to one person: Kokoro.

"You even used to get nervous when I had friends over. *Grade school* friends," Kisasi pressed.

"What?! I-I wasn't nervous around your friends!"

"The more I think about it," she continued, ignoring me, "the weirder it gets. How the hell did you manage to become friends with Kokoro?"

"Ugh... W-Well, we're both otaku, and her situation was similar to mine, so... I think being able to talk about our hobbies was a huge part of it."

"Oh..."

"By the way, are you able to enjoy your hobbies over there in India?" I asked her.

"As if! How could I do that outside of Japan?! It must have been easy for you though, since you were so selfish and stayed here by yourself!" Her tone made it clear just how mad at me she was.

Hey, if she'd wanted to stay in Japan she could have just said so, but then again she was very close to our mom, and it must be hard living away from your parents when you're still in middle school. On the other hand, the reason she didn't stay could be that she didn't want to live alone with me...

"Say," I said, changing the subject to something else I had to ask her about. "About those doujinshi you're going to sell. I just have to make sure—they aren't *adult* doujinshi, right?"

"D-Don't be stupid! Do you really think I could draw something like that?!"

That's still way too embarrassing for now..."

"...For now?! So you're going to do it eventually?!"

She's already thinking of drawing raunchy manga at her age?! Is she some kind of closet pervert?!

"Anyway," she said, "what's the most popular game genre here in Japan at the minute?"

"Gacha games are the thing right now. *FGO* and that..."

"I see... And what are girls playing?"

"No idea why you'd ask *me* that, but... I guess the *HypMic* game is pretty popular," I said.

It then dawned on me that I was having a normal, natural conversation with my sister for the first time in years. It felt weird—as if we'd gone back in time to when she was still in grade school and we were so close to each other.

We kept chatting for a while, talking without any awkwardness and asking each other lots of questions: I asked her about India, our parents, and how she liked school over there, and she asked me about the latest otaku trends in Japan.

I used to think that she'd changed, but I soon realized that this wasn't the case. She was still the same impertinent kid that I remembered. I was happy that she was at least talking with me once again, and I wished that we could have gotten back to this point when she had still lived in Japan... although it was obviously too late for that. However, our little conversation ended up making me even more curious about the reason she'd started avoiding me in the first place.

Surely I didn't just imagine that... did I? I want to ask her, but I can't. As the older brother, I just can't...

"Hi! I'm back!"

"Kokoro! Hello!"

"Oh, you're back. Hey."

“Were you two... chatting?”

Kokoro, who’d just walked through the door, looked from me to Kisaki. She’d probably noticed how little interaction we usually had with each other, hence her surprise at seeing us together.

Later that night, I woke up and went downstairs to use the restroom. I tiptoed as silently as possible so as not to wake up Kisaki or Kokoro.

Just as I reached the last step, I noticed that the light was still on in the living room.

Is one of them still up?

“Thank you so much... I wouldn’t be able to bind all of these by myself.”

“Aw, don’t mention it! I’ve always wanted to make a doujinshi, you know? But I can’t draw or write or anything, so I’m happy I can help out in some way! And it’s even a HypMic doujinshi!”

Through the living room door, I could hear two voices, the sound of the printer, and something playing on the TV at low volume.

So Nishina is helping Kisaki bind her doujinshi...

“You’ve been a huge help! Really!”

“You already got your newest work bound, right?”

“Yeah. I’m going to sell it for around a hundred yen or so, as an extra. I got the idea for the story just recently, so I didn’t have the time to get it printed and bound properly, but I still wanted to have it ready for Comiket one way or another.”

“But that’s super cool! I love it when my favorite circles sell copybooks!”

Even though I had no experience publishing doujinshi myself, I had heard about copybooks. Instead of having their work turned into a properly published manga volume by a company, sometimes artists just photocopied their drawings and bound them by hand.

Kisaki’s so passionate about this that she even drew a last-minute doujinshi,

wow. I have to respect her commitment, even if it's just another BL story...

I would have offered to help out too, but she probably didn't want me seeing her drawings, so I decided to continue to the bathroom and then head back to bed.

The second I grabbed the door handle, however, I heard Kokoro's voice once again.

"So, like... I've seen you talking with Ichigaya quite a bit since you got back, but he told me the two of you didn't get along at all. Was that true?"

Her words took me by surprise, so I froze in place, my hand still stuck to the door.

"No, you're right. We definitely didn't..." I heard Kisaki reply.

"I remember him saying it wasn't always like that though..."

"Yeah, we used to get along fine when we were kids."

"I was just curious about what happened to get you two talking again."

Straight to the point! I'll just stay a second longer. Maybe knowing her answer will do me more harm than good, but I have to hear it!

"Oh, but you don't have to tell me if you don't feel like it," Kokoro said.

"No, it's not a problem. It began years ago, when he started avoiding me all of a sudden."

Huh...? Did she just say that I was the one avoiding her?

I was so surprised that I had to grab the door handle tighter to prevent myself from walking into the living room.

What's she on about?! She was the one avoiding me!

"He... was avoiding you?"



“It was right before I started middle school. We used to watch anime and play games together all the time, but then he started taking all those things to his room to do by himself...”

Hmmm? Watching anime and playing games by myself, instead of with her... Well, maybe that does ring a bell...

Years ago, I did all of those things in the living room with Kisaki. Middle school, however, marked somewhat of a coming-of-age for boys like me, who begin to develop a taste for... *improper* material. Anime and games with sexy scenes in them, erotic manga and illustrations, and other things in that vein.

Of course, I couldn't check out that kind of thing in front of Kisaki, which is why I'd started spending more time alone in the privacy of my room. Kisaki had often tried to come in, and she once even did so without knocking. Thankfully, I wasn't doing anything indecent at the time, but I realized that if I wanted to avoid an encounter that could traumatize both Kisaki and me, I had to set some boundaries.

At the time, I'd scolded her and told her not to enter my room without permission. She'd started knocking and asking me what I was doing, but more often than not, I'd tell her to leave me alone because I was busy. And busy I was... as boys often are during puberty.

Could she be talking about that? Did she think I was avoiding her?! That's more or less the same time as when I thought we'd started drifting apart...

“When I tried to find him in his room, he'd just tell me to go away...” Kisaki told Kokoro.

“What?! That's horrible! He didn't tell me that!” Kokoro replied, clearly infuriated.

Y-You see, I had a very good reason...

“So, since he was avoiding me, I thought I'd keep out of his way, and we grew distant in no time. To be honest, today was the first time in years that we talked so much.”

Wait, wait, wait. So she started acting like that because she somehow thought

I was avoiding her... Just because I needed some privacy to practice using the mouse left-handed?! She didn't start hating me or anything?!

"I wondered what I'd done to him, and I still do... but it's not easy asking something like that. N-Not that I was lonely because he wasn't playing with me or anything though!"

"Unbelievable! Why would he do something like that to his cute little sister?!"

I was in a kind of trance listening to Kisaki's explanation, so it took me a second or two to remember the reason why I was down there in the first place. But I couldn't go to the toilet now—the flushing noise would have made them realize that I'd overheard them.

So I snuck back up to my room, taking care to be even quieter than I had been the other way, and got back into my bed with a full bladder.

She was basically just lonely because I wasn't playing with her... That's way sweeter than I expected! Did I really risk the bond I had with my sister for something so stupid? I can't believe it! I still wanted to play games and watch anime with her too! The non-sexy ones, at least...

I turned and twisted over and over, torn between relief and regret. I would never get back the years I'd spent unwittingly driving Kisaki away, but at least I could be kinder to her starting tomorrow.

And then, when she comes back to Japan for good, I'll do my best to fix things, so we can go back to being two happy, loving siblings again.

I promised to myself that I'd try my very best to improve my relationship with my sister, before praying to whoever was up there that the two girls would find their way back to their room before I wet the bed.

* * *

"Good morning, girls."

Kokoro yawned. "...What? Ichigaya? You're already up?! What are you doing? You're making breakfast?!"

Kisaki, who had come down just behind her, was also staring at me in disbelief.

“Huh?! *You’re* cooking?!”

It was the next morning, and I was greeted by nothing but surprise. Our rule was that Kokoro and I would each worry about our own breakfast, and so, as I wasn’t forced to cook in the morning, I almost never did. As for Kisaki, she had never seen me near a stove top at any time of the day, so her surprise was understandable.

“I’ve actually had to cook for myself since you guys left for India, you know? Well, not every day, but still...”

“You’re the last person on the planet I’d ever imagine cooking,” she replied.

“You’re not going to show some appreciation when I’ve gone through the trouble of cooking for you?”

“What...?”

I ignored her conflicted expression, plated the wieners and sunny-side up eggs, and put the three dishes—one for each of us—on the table. Then, I plucked three slices of toast out of the toaster and put one on each.

“Y-You made mine too?” Kisaki stammered. “What’s gotten into you?! You’re scaring me!”

“In all the time since I moved in here, this is the first time I’ve seen him wake up early to cook breakfast,” Kokoro said, just as bewildered.

“What? Aren’t you going to eat?” I asked.

The two girls immediately responded with a “Yes!” and sat down. After what I’d heard last night, I’d decided to attempt some kindness toward Kisaki, for at least for as long as she was going to stay in Japan. But instead of gratefulness, I’d somehow just made her suspicious.

“Kagetora actually cooked this... Is this some kind of weird dream...?” she murmured to herself.

“I wanted to ask before, Kisaki, but is there anything I can do to help with your doujinshi?” I knew she’d already had a hand from Kokoro, but I might as well give it a try.

“...Huh?! Where’d *that* come from all of a sudden?!”

“It’s just a few days till Comiket, isn’t it?”

“Th-There’s nothing in particular... and I don’t want you to see my drawings anyway!”

“Hmm... All right. Just let me know if anything comes up.”

“Why are you acting like this?! It’s creepy!”

“Hey! Is this how you thank me for trying to be nice to you?!”

Now that she’d gone straight from surprised to creeped out, I was starting to regret trying to make it up to her.

Kokoro, meanwhile, watched our back-and-forth in silence with a faint smile on her face.

* * *

The night before Comiket, Kisaki and Kokoro were busy preparing in Kisaki’s room. My sister had to take care of her doujinshi, and my roommate had to take care of her cosplay; both were a lot harder than what I had to do. Since I was only going to help out with the booth, my preparations amounted to putting a couple of bottles of water in the fridge so we’d have something cool to drink the next day.

Had we been planning to line up with all the other visitors, we’d have also needed hand fans, cold compresses, and other measures to avoid dying of heatstroke, but thanks to the circle ticket, we didn’t have to worry about any of that.

“Ichigaya! Can you come here for a sec?” Kokoro shouted from upstairs while I was killing time in the living room.

What does she need me for now?

I announced my presence outside my sister’s room, rather than just opening the door, and heard Kokoro ask Kisaki whether it was fine to let me in. My sister told her that it was, and I walked in to find a whole mess of doujinshi and cosplay-related items scattered all over the floor.

“What do you think of this dress?” Kokoro asked me.

To my surprise, she had taken my advice and bought a white sundress, an off-the-shoulder one with a few frills—simple but cute. It was precisely the kind of dress that any otaku would conjure up in their mind when thinking of cute summer attire for girls.



As much as I hated to admit it, Kokoro looked stunning whenever she wore otaku-approved clothes. A lot of people would be ready to look past her rough personality and fujoshi hobbies on behalf of how attractive she looked.

Well, she can be rough, but she's a good girl, to be honest, and she even likes anime and games aimed at guys. If she started always wearing this kind of thing instead of all that flashy gyaru stuff she usually goes for, any otaku she met would treat her like a princess... Wait, why am I coming up with all these good things to say about her?

"Um... What's with the silence? You trying not to laugh or something?! Ugh, I knew it! This is way too cutesy for me, isn't it? I look like a total otaku-digger... Hah, I mean, I'd never wear something like this in front of my friends," Kokoro said.

"I think my brother is just at a loss for words because of how cute you look," Kisaki commented.

"I-It's not...! I...! I was just thinking that it's, you know... apt! Very apt! Any otaku guy will love it! You should definitely go with that!" I chokingly replied, mincing my words while trying to object to Kisaki's (correct) theory.

"Seriously? I thought it was too obvious. In that case, I'm glad I bought it! Then I wonder how I should style my hair... Since it's gonna be hot and all that, I've gotta tie it up, but—"

"Wh-What about a ponytail?!" I interrupted.

"Huh?"

"It's just that, um, a lot of otaku guys like ponytails, so..." I explained.

"Oh, I didn't know that! Huh. That's perfect then! I just hope my hair won't get too messed up under the wig by the time the event is over," she replied.

Kisaki looked at her, surprised. "You're not... going to go out with that Toppo cosplayer after Comiket?!"

"Oh, no, I haven't asked him out or anything. B-But maybe with some luck..."

"Ah, I see..." Kisaki replied, smiling oddly at her friend's overeagerness. Thinking about her hairstyle before telling her crush that she wanted to have

dinner with him did seem a bit backwards. I couldn't imagine Kokoro doing something so brazen as actively asking that guy out, which meant that all of this effort could very well end up being for nothing.

"I'm gonna wear a pair of cute heeled sandals to go with the sundress..." Kokoro said to herself.

"Heeled sandals?! Are you out of your mind?!" I asked, shocked. "Wearing anything but sneakers to Comiket is suicide! At least, if you have to go with sandals, go with ones that don't have heels!"

"But none of my flat sandals fit this dress..."

"Look, it's going to be slightly better than usual since we don't have to line up, but even then, we're talking about Comiket. The place we'll be at is called the *Big Sight* Exhibition Center for a reason. Forget about the heels, and try to choose comfortable shoes for your cosplay too," I told her.

"I mean, at least the shoes that go with my cosplay don't have heels, so that should be fine. But, since you put it like that, I'll choose some flats for the dress too," she replied, easily convinced.

This was going to be Kokoro's first time at Comiket, so she probably didn't have any idea yet, but if she prioritized fashion over function, she was going to be in for a lot of foot pain.

"I think that's about it for the preparations! I'm super pumped already! I bet I won't be able to sleep tonight!" Kokoro squealed.

Kisaki, on the other hand, remained strangely silent. She was probably nervous about her first time selling her doujinshi at such a large event.

I needed to mentally prepare myself too, since there was quite a bit of shopping that I needed to get done while I was there, even though I'd also have to help with the booth. And yet my mind still wandered back to a certain someone who I'd be seeing for the first time in weeks—Elena.

The last time I saw her had been at Wonder Festival, when she kind of, maybe, *possibly* confessed to me, and I hadn't spoken to her at all since. There'd been nothing else on my mind lately. She had asked me to forget about it, so maybe she'd just pretend like it had never happened when we saw each

other.

But what if she confesses again?! I guess the first time wasn't a confession per se, but she strongly implied that she liked me...

I was nervous about seeing Elena... but I was also looking forward to it.

5

It was August 8, the day that Kisaki would be running her booth at Comiket.

Last year, I'd only washed my face and brushed my teeth, never mind bothering to fix my hair before the event. Of course, this year I couldn't be that careless.

Kokoro was probably going to drill me about all the usual stuff about meeting girls there, but that wasn't the point; even if I *did* meet someone new, I didn't really care. The only girl I cared about was Elena. I wouldn't want her to see me and think that I was uglier than she remembered.

Yesterday, I'd shaved, plucked my eyebrows, and prepared the clothes I would wear. All that was left to do now was to change and make my hair somewhat presentable.

When the girls finally walked into the living room, it was already too late to eat breakfast. We left the house at seven and hurried to Big Sight, where Comiket awaited us. I only had a backpack with me, but Kisaki and Kokoro both dragged huge trolley bags behind them.

Wouldn't a cool guy offer to take their bags? Yeah... but I can't take both of them, and offering the favor to just one of them would be weird, not to mention embarrassing...

While we were on the train, Kisaki turned to Kokoro with a worried expression on her face.

"I wanted to tell you something. I'm very grateful you agreed to help me out... and you too, I guess," she added, looking at me. "So, I'm sorry if my doujinshi doesn't sell at all and you're left doing nothing. You can just go and enjoy the event if that happens!"

She hadn't shown me her Pixiv and Twitter accounts, let alone her doujinshi, so I didn't know how good of an artist she was, or how much she could be expected to sell. But sounding so negative right before the real deal wasn't very

much like her. I couldn't tell if she was being modest or if she really believed that.

"Awww, you know that's never gonna happen!" Kokoro comforted her. "Look at how many people bookmark your work on Pixiv!"

Oh... So I guess she's pretty good after all.

"But loads of those are from my friends on Twitter, and most people bookmark stuff that they don't really plan to buy, so I don't know how much of that will be reflected in actual sales," Kisaki replied.

"Even if you take out all the people you just mentioned, I'm sure there's plenty left! Oh, and I'm sorry my cosplay isn't HypMic related..."

"Oh please, don't worry about that! I'm actually really looking forward to seeing your Arimu cosplay!"

Right, she's going to cosplay Arimu. I'm looking forward to seeing her cosplay too... Wait, what am I thinking?

As we reached Tokyo Big Sight Station, Kokoro's eyes seemed to pop out of her head.

"Whoa, look at all the people!"

"Yes... It's even more overwhelming than it looked on TV..."

Both Kokoro and Kisaki seemed to be surprised by the size of the crowd, and I remembered feeling the same way when I'd first been to Comiket. In fact, while lining up with all of them, I'd promised myself that I'd never do it ever again. Of course, as soon as I started browsing the booths and buying doujinshi, I'd gotten so excited that I entirely forgot just how painful the wait had been.

"D-Do we have to get in that line? For real?" Kokoro asked, terrified.

"No, don't worry. People with circle tickets get in through a separate entrance," Kisaki explained.

"Phew, I was scared for a moment there!"

Circle tickets really are wonderful, wonderful things...

“I’ll go change as fast as possible and then meet you at the booth!” Kokoro said when we got inside, before heading straight for the changing rooms.

Left alone, Kisaki and I went to the area reserved for circles—the west exhibition hall. One glance at my sister’s face was enough to see that she still looked worried.

She must be worrying about whether anyone will come to her booth...

“S-Say, Kisaki, does it even matter if people buy your manga? I mean, drawing and publishing a doujinshi is pretty impressive if you ask me. It takes a lot of effort and all that,” I said.

While it’s true that I said it to cheer her up, I wasn’t lying. As someone who consumed as much manga and doujinshi as I did oxygen, I deeply respected her for being able to actually create one.

“Uh...? What are you talking about? It’s not impressive at all. Anyone can do that, as long as they have the money...” she replied.

“Oh, right...”

I guess my words didn’t really reach her...

“But maybe you do have a point,” she said. “When you make a doujinshi, you’re just drawing stuff you like and publishing it for fun, so worrying about how many people come to buy it doesn’t make that much sense, I guess...”

She sighed, but at least she seemed to have relaxed a bit.

We shortly reached the right hall, asked for the number of the lot reserved for Kisaki, and made our way there while looking at a map.

“This should be it,” I said when I finally found the spot we were looking for. Inside was a table with several pamphlets, folding chairs, and some other stuff on it.

“The new copies are here! Perfect!” Kisaki rejoiced. The printing company often delivers doujinshi directly to the client’s lot, saving them the hassle of carrying all that manga themselves.

“I have to check them to see if everything is okay! But first, we have to move those chairs out of the way,” she said.

We took the three folding chairs down from on top of the table, but since there wasn't enough space to put all of them side by side, we placed two of them closer to the table and the third one behind them.

Most of the pamphlets looked like useless junk, but Kisaki put all of them in her bag anyway. Then, she took out a box cutter, used it to open a box under the table, and took a look at the doujinshi inside.

“Wow...” she whispered, staring with sparkling eyes at the cover of the manga she was now holding in her hands.

Her first printed manga... No wonder she's getting emotional.

I was finally able to take a peek at the cover. It surprised me for a variety of reasons. First of all, the art was incredibly good. I had no idea that Kisaki was such a talented artist. Of course, the subject was a couple of men making out with each other, but I decided not to pass any judgment on that. My main point of concern was the red “R15” icon on one corner.

“*Fifteen plus?! Is there porn in that story?!*” I asked Kisaki, whose face turned a deep shade of red as she hid the doujinshi behind her back.



“Wh-What do you care?! And I told you not to look at my manga!”

“How am I supposed to help you sell them without even seeing the cover?”

“Ugh...”

“Can I take a look inside?”

“Absolutely no way!”

She could at least let me see them, sheesh! I normally don't care for BL, but who wouldn't be curious about a 15+ manga drawn by his own sister?

Kisaki, taking great care to hold the book so that I couldn't see its contents, flipped through the pages, carefully checking for any printing mistakes.

Her reaction didn't really leave room for objections, so I silently waited for her to finish. When she had, she took more stuff out of her bag: a tablecloth, price tags, a coin holder with some change in it, a board listing the items for sale, those copybooks, and a bunch of pens.

While she was laying the tablecloth over our half of the table, the circle that would be using the other half arrived. They were two girls, probably in their twenties. Both of them looked like the serious, meek types.

“Are you... Queen?!” one of the girls asked Kisaki.

“Ah, yes! Ringo?!”

“Yes! I'm so happy to meet you in person!”

“Me too! I hope today's going to be fun!”

“Wow, I didn't think you'd be so young! I imagined you were around our age...”

I figured that “Queen” was probably Kisaki's pen name, and that the girl she called “Ringo”—most likely also a pen name—was an online friend of hers.

“This is Tokita; she's going to help me out today,” Ringo said, introducing the other girl.

After they were done greeting Kisaki, the two girls' gazes shifted toward me. Kisaki followed suit, looking somewhat embarrassed.

“Oh, he’s... helping me out with the booth. This is my older brother,” she explained, struggling for words.

“Your brother?! That’s amazing!”

I forced a smile and said hello to the two surprised girls, who returned the favor. There were no other men in the spaces around ours, so seeing one in what was clearly a BL-only zone must have been surprising in itself, not to mention the fact that I was there to help sell the homosexual softcore erotica that my *little sister* had drawn. I was suddenly beginning to feel... rather awkward.

Kisaki and I continued preparing the booth, taking the books out and lining them up on the table with the price labels in front of them. While we were doing so, I could hear the girls next to us whispering to each other.

“Can you believe two young siblings that are so good-looking are selling doujinshi together?” one of them was saying to the other.

Two siblings... Are they talking about us?! I’ll admit that Kisaki is so fashionable that you’d never take her for an otaku, and, even if it is weird to say so as her brother, she’s far from ugly... Heck, I guess she’s outright cute. But they’re talking about both of us... What?!

Granted, I’d put a lot of effort into myself that day, since I was half expecting to run into Elena. That being said, I’d never thought in a thousand years that I, Otaku McOtakinson, would ever be called “good-looking.”

To be honest, I couldn’t help but be a bit thrilled about that.

“You really have some passion for this though, huh? Making these at the last minute when you already have a printed book to sell...” I said while helping Kisaki line the copybooks up next to the professionally bound ones.

“I can’t help it. I came up with the idea for the story and wanted to publish it...” she replied.

Sure, it was probably just another story about handsome men making out with each other, but I still had to respect my sister for how much creativity she poured into her hobby.

“Wait a second...” Kiseki suddenly said, freezing in place. “How do *you* know that I made these copybooks at the last minute?”

“W-Well, I... Uh...”

I’d overheard her conversation with Kokoro the previous night, but I obviously couldn’t tell her that. If I did, she’d accuse me of eavesdropping.

Oh no! I was so careful not to make a noise yesterday, and now I go and let my mouth run like an idiot! Great going, Kagekora!

“I mean, er... Since it’s a copybook, you know, I just imagined you must have been in a hurry, right?”

“But you said it like you knew it for certain! D-Did you... hear what I was saying last night?!”

She figured it out!

“I thought I heard something outside the living room yesterday... That was you?! You didn’t walk in and you didn’t flush the toilet at all, so I thought I’d just imagined it... I can’t believe it! You were sneaking around on purpose so we wouldn’t know you were eavesdropping!”

“N-No! I didn’t mean to hear you, I swear!”

“So you *did* eavesdrop on us!” she shouted, her face completely red.

Lying won’t do me any good at this point...

“Look, I couldn’t help it! I meant to go to the toilet, but then I heard you two talking and I figured it’d be awkward to go to the toilet, so I just went back! What’s so bad about that?!”

“H-How much did you hear?”

“I... don’t know. I can’t remember exactly.”

Ah, what the hell. Might as well tell her what’s been on my mind.

“I might have heard you say that I was avoiding you...”

“You heard *that*?! Y-You...!”

“I just wanted to say that it was a misunderstanding...”

“You creep—huh?”

“I think you definitely get it now, but... you know what anime and games can be like, right? There’s ones that you don’t want your family to see. I was just shutting myself in my room to check out that sort of stuff. I wasn’t avoiding you at all. To be honest, I thought you were the one who was avoiding me...”

“You can’t be serious,” she murmured. “What kind of stupid reason is that?!”

“What...?”

“‘Ones that you don’t want your family to see’? You’re telling me you were holed up in your room watching porn all that time?!”

“Huh?!”

“And you were still in middle school! Ack! That’s the *last* thing I wanted to hear from my brother!”

“W-Wait!” I stammered, trying to stop her from getting any louder. The people from circles nearby had started staring at us.

“I went through *that* because of your weird addiction to *porn*? I-I can’t believe it...” Kisaki said. “I was so lonely and anxious all this time all because of that. I feel like an idiot...”

Lonely? Anxious? She really felt like that because she thought I was avoiding her?

“Sorry to keep you waiting!”

A familiar voice made both of us snap out of it. It was Kokoro, dressed as Arimu Yumemi. Her pink wig and blue maid outfit were on point, as were the makeup and the colored contact lenses. It looked like Arimu herself had been transported into the third dimension to spread the news of BL at Comiket.

Did she... pad her bra or something? If my memory serves me right, Arimu’s chest circumference is supposed to be around 90 cm. Nishina might have quite the pair herself, but today they’re on a totally different level... Wait, why am I staring at her chest?! I’m going to creep her out! I quickly averted my eyes from the danger zone.

“K-Kokoro! You’re sooo cute!” Kisaki said.

“Thanks! I’m sorry it took me so long. Am I too late to help with anything?”

“Not at all!”

Kokoro came to join us behind the table and took a seat.

“Is this your latest work?! It looks incredible! Can I read it?!”

“Of course!”

Heeey! Why do you let her read it and not me?!

“Aaaaah! I can’t take it! This is too hot!” Kokoro screeched as she flipped through the pages.

“If you’d like, I can give you a copy. I know it’s not enough to thank you, but...”

“Really?! Thank you so much!”

“I’m helping out too, you know?” I said, unprompted.

“L-Like I’d give *you* a copy! You wouldn’t even want one, would you?!”

“To be honest, I’m really curious about the contents, so...”

“Absolutely no way!”

Kokoro’s arrival had put an abrupt end to my conversation with Kisaki. I was shocked to know she’d felt so bad because of me, and I wanted to talk more about that. Unfortunately, even if we did end up alone later on, it wasn’t exactly the easiest subject to bring up.

I can hardly believe it... I was sad too because I thought I was the one being avoided...

With the three of us at the booth together, we decided that Kisaki and Kokoro would sit at the front, and I would stay in the back—that would probably make female clients more comfortable buying.

Just as we’d finished getting ready, an announcement blared from the speakers in the hall. It was time.

“Good morning, everyone. The 96th Comic Market summer event is now open!”

Before now, I'd only ever heard that announcement while waiting in line. I certainly never imagined that I'd one day be able to hear it from the circles' area... while sitting next to my sister.

We joined in as everyone in the hall started clapping.

"Whooooa! I'm getting all shaky!" Kokoro grinned in excitement, offering the perfect contrast to my sister, who could barely muster a nervous whisper. I could only see her small back, but that was enough to tell that the pressure was getting to her.

"I-It started... It's open... I hope we get at least a couple of customers," she said, more to herself than to us.

She's still worrying about that...

"Don't worry! We'll get tons!" Kokoro said, slapping her on the shoulder.

The guests finally began pouring through the doors. As expected, most of the ones making their way over to this area were girls. Before today, I'd only visited the parts of Comiket where guys tended to congregate, so this was a very strange sight.

Eventually, some even started walking closer to our table. Every time one of them seemed to be approaching it, I felt a rush of excitement run through my body. I hadn't read it, but it was still Kisaki's doujinshi, so I really hoped it would do well.

Finally! I thought when a girl stopped in front of our table.

"One copy of the latest issue, please," the girl said, without even checking inside it.

"O-Of course! Thank you very much!" Kisaki quickly replied, standing up from her seat.

Kokoro picked up a copy and informed the customer that it would be five hundred yen. The customer happily handed the money to Kokoro and left with a smile on her face.

"You already sold a copy!" Kokoro squealed.

"Y-Yes! I did!" my sister replied, looking a bit surprised. "I didn't expect a

customer this fast, and she didn't even bother to see what was inside..."

"See? What did I tell you? That's totally someone who bookmarked your work on Pixiv and was planning to come here and get one!"

Oh, that'd explain why she didn't think twice before buying it.

"So... there really are people who'll pay actual money to buy the things I've drawn. I was really happy when my drawings were liked or bookmarked and all that, but this makes it feel so much more real... I'm so happy I could cry."

Thinking about it, since this was her first time bringing her doujinshi to an in-person event, it was also the first time Kisaki had met any of her readers.

And the first person to come over bought it right away. Way to go, Kisaki!

"Th-That's cool!" I said—praising her any further would have been too awkward.

"Y-Yeah..." she replied.

I couldn't see her face, but I imagined she was blushing.

"Oh, by the way!" my sister then said, looking at Kokoro, mostly, but also glancing at me for a brief moment. "If you want to go and look around, feel free! The earlier you get there, the more likely you are to find the things you want to buy!"

I had a few doujinshi on my shopping list, and I'd also checked Pixiv to find out where the circles' booths were. But that was far from my top priority. I'd mostly come to help Kisaki sell her books, to help Kokoro meet up with the cosplayer she had a crush on, and to see Elena for the first time in weeks. If the doujinshi I wanted were all sold out by the time I went looking for them, then so be it. I could always buy them online after Comiket was over.

"I was gonna go to the cosplay area around lunchtime," Kokoro replied, "but I can go buy my doujinshi whenever. Like, if you tell me the ones you want, I can get them for you while I'm at it. Is there anything you're worried could be sold out soon?"

"Hmm... There is one."

"I'll go buy it right now then!"

“Thank you so much!” Kiseki replied, before giving Kokoro all the details she needed to identify the doujinshi she wanted.

After serving another customer, Kokoro left to go shopping by herself, leaving me alone with my sister.

“Um... do you want to go shopping too?” Kiseki asked me.

“Yeah, but I can go do that later.”

“Oh. You can go now if you want too, you know?”

“I can’t leave you here all by yourself.”

After a moment of surprise, Kiseki, suddenly annoyed, turned away from me.

“I’ll be fine running the booth on my own! That was the plan to begin with,” she said.

“I know, but you’re still just a middle school girl...”

“Stop treating me like a child!”

She’d raised her voice, but I could tell that she wasn’t really angry—this had always been her way of showing she was embarrassed.

More and more attendees bought Kiseki’s doujinshi—both the store-bound and the hand-bound ones. She wasn’t gathering a crowd or anything like that, but the stream of customers was pretty constant. Kiseki handed the copies to the customers, and I kept the table stocked with fresh ones from the cardboard box.

I’ve got to give it to her. She may still be a schoolgirl, but she’s got talent. Uploading her stuff on the web has gotten her so many customers already! I wish I could read it.

It didn’t take long for Kokoro to come back.

“Every single one of the doujinshi you wanted were still in stock!” she proudly announced to Kiseki.

“Really?! That’s great news! Thank you so much!”

“And I found all the ones I was looking for too! It’s all thanks to you and the

circle tickets!” She seemed to be overjoyed about getting all the books that were on her shopping list.

“You can go next then,” Kisasi told me.

“Ah... right. Be right back then,” I said, getting up from my chair.

I headed over toward the booths that interested me, and I somehow managed to buy everything I was looking for. Walking through the hot event hall was tiring, but it was nothing in comparison to standing in line in the scorching heat.

Kokoro was right—we had Kisasi and the circle tickets to thank for making doujinshi-shopping at Comiket a bearable feat. Some authors even sold their extra tickets to strangers, and, while I couldn’t really get behind that, I definitely understood why someone would be ready to pay good money to get their hands on one.

“I’m back!”

“How did it go?” Kokoro asked me.

“Even better than I expected. I found all the doujinshi I was looking for.”

“Oh, that’s a relief,” Kisasi said.

“Yeah... Circle tickets really are amazing. Thanks, Kisasi.”

“S-Sure...”

All of a sudden, a couple of familiar faces showed up in front of our table.

“There she is!”

“Hello, everyone!”

They were Iroha and Mikoto, my former maid café colleagues. Kokoro had probably texted them the location of our booth.

“You’re cosplaying Arimu? You look amazing!” Iroha commented.

“It’s certainly not easy to pull something like that off. You have a gift,” Mikoto agreed. Unlike Kokoro, neither of our friends were cosplaying this time.

“Awww, you’re too kind, both of you! Oh, right, Kisaki, this is Iroha and this is Mikoto. Ichigaya and I met them while working at a maid café together.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Ichigaya Kisaki,” my sister introduced herself.

“I-Ichigaya?! You’re Ichi’s sister?! But you look nothing like him! You’re so cute!”

“I-Iroha!” I protested, shocked by the ease with which she was able to insult me.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you too,” Mikoto said. “Your brother used to help us at the café. Well, usually it was the rest of us helping *him* out...”

“M-Mikoto!” I protested again, although she definitely had a point.

Kisaki looked shocked for a moment before hurriedly bowing her head and saying, “My pleasure!”

Hm? What’s she so surprised about?

“Oh my, you’re so polite. You really are nothing like your brother,” Mikoto told her.

“Hey! I’m polite too!”

Iroha, meanwhile, was staring in awe at Kisaki’s doujinshi.

“Whoa, I was already surprised that you were selling your art so young, but you’re great at this!” she said.

“Oh, but we’re getting in the way. We should get going now,” Mikoto said as another customer approached us and picked up a copy from the table. “We’ll text you later on. It was lovely meeting you, Kisaki.”

“Thanks! That sounds awesome!” Kokoro replied, and the two left.

They swept in from nowhere, dealt a ton of damage, and left just as quickly. Those two are like a summer storm.

“Unbelievable...” Kisaki muttered to herself.

“Hm?”

“I can’t believe you’re friends not just with Kokoro, but with other pretty girls

too,” she said, looking at me with a slight frown. She seemed genuinely confused.

“What do you want me to say?” I shrugged.

I must look way too popular and extroverted to her... I thought, but then I remembered that I’d never been friends with a girl before meeting Kokoro, and that Kisaki had every reason to be surprised.

“Oh!” Kokoro exclaimed, looking at her phone. “Minami said she’s coming!”

I felt my whole body tense from head to toe.

“Is that another friend of yours?” Kisaki asked.

“Yep!” Kokoro replied. “She goes to our school. She’s a voice actress, and she’s one hundred percent the prettiest girl ever!”

“Whoa, you’re friends with a voice actress?! That’s amazing!”

Minami’s coming here?! Oh damn, I’m so nervous... Is my hair okay? I need to take a look in a mirror, but I don’t want these two seeing that...

“Hello.”

I barely had the time to worry before Elena’s arrival.

“Minami! Thanks for coming!” Kokoro welcomed her.

Our blonde friend was wearing a mask and hat to hide her identity, but there was no disguising how beautiful she was. Elena looked amazing in her gingham dress. It was still hard to believe that a girl that looked like *this* would like me, as a friend or otherwise.

“Oh, hello... I’m Minami. It’s nice to meet you. You’re Ichigaya’s sister, right?”

“Yes! I’m Kisaki! Nice to meet you too!”

After they’d exchanged greetings, Kokoro began showing Elena the doujinshi, leaving me an outsider to their three-way conversation.

I missed the timing to join in... I should’ve said hello! But I was way too nervous...

“It’s nice to see you here, Ichigaya.” Elena addressed me all of a sudden, right when I was worrying that I wouldn’t be able to speak with her at all.

She’s smiling at me like she always does...

“O-Oh! M-Minami! Have you been enjoying the event? Did you... m-manage to buy some doujinshi?” I asked, stumbling over my words so much that I must have looked like an idiot.

“Yes, thankfully the ones I wanted were still available. Though I wouldn’t want to be a nuisance loitering around your booth, so I’ll take my leave.”

I wanted to chat with her a bit more though...

“Th-Thank you for stopping by!”

She casually waved at us all and then walked away. I was surprised by how calm she was acting, as if our last meeting had never happened. On the other hand though, I felt like she was trying to avoid me.

I did my best to tidy up just for her and then she left after a few seconds...

“Wow... That girl was beautiful! She can’t be Japanese, can she?” Kisaki asked.

“She’s half-Japanese, half-English,” I explained.

“You were trying pretty hard to talk with her, but she wasn’t having any of it, huh? It looked like she was trying to avoid you,” my sister said, giving me a look of pure pity.

“Wh-What?! You’re just imagining things!”

“Did you do something to upset Minami?” Kokoro then asked me. There was no pity in my roommate’s gaze—just suspicion.

“N-No, I didn’t do anything!”

Maybe she sounded a bit cold toward me, but that must be because she felt awkward after what she said last time... I think. Either way, it’s a shame that I got to spend so little time with her.

Kisaki’s booth continued attracting a lot of visitors, including some of the online friends that she’d promised to meet.

“Ah!” Kokoro suddenly exclaimed, checking her phone. “Do you mind if I leave for a while?”

“Of course! No problem!”

It was pretty clear from the way that she started fixing her wig and looking into the mirror on her phone case that she’d heard about the whereabouts of a certain someone.

“Are you going to see that cosplayer guy?” I asked her.

“Y-Yeah. He just tweeted that he’s done shopping and that he’ll be in the cosplay area, so...”

“Oh?!” Kisaki chipped in. “Are you talking about that handsome Toppo cosplayer?!”

“Y-Yes. That one...” Kokoro replied, blushing. “But wouldn’t it be annoying if I just showed up? He’s cosplaying with some friends, and what if he doesn’t remember me? He might be all like, *‘Who the heck are you?’* and that’d be a bummer...”



“Don’t tell me you’re going to chicken out *now!*” I cried. I was about to remind her of how she’d decided on her Arimu cosplay just to make a good impression on the guy, but I decided to keep my mouth shut. Kisaki was listening, and maybe Kokoro wouldn’t want her to think that she was so desperate.

“I-I’m just a bit nervous! That’s all!” she replied. “I’ll see ya later then...”

Kokoro slowly stood up from her seat, with such a worried look that I considered accompanying her.

But would I be of any help...? Nah, I’d probably just be a nuisance. I’m more worried about leaving Kisaki here alone, anyway. Ninety-nine percent of the artists and attendees in this area are girls, but I can’t be sure she wouldn’t be approached by some weird guy while I’m away...

“Good luck!” Kisaki said as my roommate waved and headed to the cosplay area.

Yeah, good luck indeed...

“I wonder if she’s into him,” Kisaki said once Kokoro was out of earshot.

“Wh-Who knows? They’ve only met once, and they haven’t even talked that much... but he does look like the kind of otaku guy she’d go for.”

“Oh...” she replied, sounding strangely disappointed. “I guess I can see why. He’s cosplaying her favorite character, and he’s doing it so well it’s like Toppo himself jumped out of the screen. It figures that she’d be all over that.”

As a fellow fujoshi, Kisaki probably understood better than anyone how Kokoro would be affected by someone like that.

Right as yet another customer came over to buy Kisaki’s doujinshi, I got a LINE notification—it was Kokoro.

“So many people around! I can’t find him!”

Sheesh... I’d better help her out.

“Did you even ask where he was?”

“I did, but now that I’m here I can’t find him! And it’s so crowded I can’t stand

it! Maybe I should just come back...”

“You can’t give up after all that!”

Come on, where’s your fighting spirit?! I thought, but I also remembered how exhausting my first time at Comiket had felt with all those people surrounding me.

“Did Kokoro text you?” Kisaki asked.

“Yeah. She says it’s so crowded she’s thinking of giving up.”

“Awww, that’d be such a shame! Why don’t you go there to help her out?”

“What...?”

I’d considered that option myself, but I certainly hadn’t expected my sister to suggest it.

“I can’t leave you all by yourse—”

“You’re still worrying about that?! I said I’m fine! There’s not that many customers anymore anyway!”

I honestly didn’t know whether going over to the cosplay area would help or hinder Kokoro... but it was better than sitting around doing nothing.

“O-Okay... I’m going! I’ll be back as soon as I can!” I said as I rushed away from the table.

I thought I heard Kisaki say something along the lines of “Do take your time,” but I still didn’t want to leave her by herself any longer than necessary.

I headed toward the west wing and texted Kokoro to ask where she was, but I didn’t get a reply. The message wasn’t even marked as read. Maybe there were so many people around that messages were taking longer to arrive.

Since Kokoro had said that she was near where the cosplayer was supposed to be, I realized I could try to find him first. I know it sounds a bit stalkery, but I’d actually added his account to a private Twitter List so that I could check his tweets without him finding out.

It was my responsibility to make sure that he wasn’t weird or dangerous,

since Kokoro had the tendency to overlook all the flaws in the guys she fell for. That being said, I'd never found anything remotely suspicious on this one's timeline.

I checked it again, this time to see if he'd posted anything about where he was, and sure enough, he'd tweeted a cosplay selfie with the caption "Here I am at the cosplay area!" about thirty minutes ago.

He was wearing a blond wig, and, from what I'd been forced to learn about HypMic, I could tell he was cosplaying that one character who was shy around girls. This character was also part of an unofficial gay pairing that Kisaki and Kokoro shipped.

I didn't know whether the guy would still be there after a whole thirty minutes, but going there would at least give me a good chance at finding Kokoro.

I somehow managed to reach the spot shown in the selfie, but the crowd was so dense that I couldn't hope to find anyone without literally bumping into them. In a corner, there were several groups of cosplayers having their pictures taken. Some of them were so cute and/or sexy that I'd have liked to take a picture or two myself, but I had a more important issue to deal with.

That Arimu cosplayer is even cuter than the rest though... Huh? Wait. Isn't that Nishina?!

It was—and right next to her was a certain handsome cosplayer that she'd been looking for.

So she managed to find him...

They seemed to be having fun chatting with each other, but I couldn't hear what they were talking about from this distance. I actually walked even further away, lest Kokoro see me. At this point, since she'd already found him, I'd have just been a complete nuisance.

Huh, and she did it all by herself. She isn't even the only one smiling... That guy's smiling too. I guess I wasn't needed after all.

Kokoro had taken things into her own hands and taken a huge step toward finding her perfect otaku boyfriend. I should've been happy for her.

But for some reason... I wasn't. I felt a little bit sad.

"Huh? You're back already?" Kiseki asked when I returned to the booth.
"Where's Kokoro?!"

"She'd already found the guy by the time I got there, so I came back before she could see me."

"What? Why'd you leave instead of going to talk to her?!"

"I'd have just gotten in the way, you know?"

Kiseki looked at me as if she had more to say, but she didn't speak.

"What have I done now?" I asked.

"Nothing... I... I just wanted to see that guy's cosplay! Yes, that's all!"

"Huh? Well I'm sure she'll show you herself later."

"Y-Yeah... But I was just wondering..." Kiseki continued in a quiet voice. "Are you okay with that?"

"Okay with what?"

Before my sister could answer, another customer walked up to the booth.

"Oh, welcome! Here's your copy! Thank you very much!"

"Kiseki," I said once the customer was gone. "What were you talking about?"

"Nothing. It's fine."

"It wasn't nothing! What did you mean?!"

"Just forget about it," she said, turning to another customer. "Thank you very much! Have a nice day!"

In the end, she didn't explain at all.

Am I fine with that? Fine with what? You know I'm trying to help Nishina find a boyfriend... What is there not to be fine with?

I checked my phone and noticed that Kokoro had finally managed to reply.

"I'm in the cosplay area, just right of the entrance! Are you coming?"

"I thought I would, but I've changed my mind."

"God, the cosplay area is like a sauna! It's so hot and crowded!"

After a short while, Kokoro returned. She sounded exhausted and was wiping the sweat off her forehead with a handkerchief, but no amount of wiping was going to take that grin off her face. She was clearly happy about the way things had gone.

"How was it?! Did you manage to meet him?" Kisaki asked.

"Aaaaah, yes! The cosplayer! I met him! I even got a picture with him! Look!" she exclaimed between breaths, showing her phone to Kisaki.

She isn't even trying to hide how excited she is...

"Wow! He looks so hot in that cosplay!"

"Right? Right?!"

"Did you talk to him?" I asked. I already knew that she had, but I didn't want her to know that I'd seen them together.

"Y-Yeah! He complimented me so much! He said he loves Arimu and that I look great as her!" She replied so euphorically that I feared she'd start foaming at the mouth. "I'm so glad I took your advice and went with this cosplay! Thanks sooo much!"

"Oh, don't mention it..."

"And then, he was like, 'Do you cosplay other characters too?' And I was like, 'Yeah, this and that,' and he was like, 'We should totally cosplay together sometime!' And we even exchanged LINE contacts!"

They got so far in so little time?!

"Really? Th-That's incredible. At this rate, you'll end up dating in no time..." Kisaki said, sneaking a quick glance at me.

What's that look for?! I mean, I agree with her. Things seem to be going great between those two.

"But then we both got asked for pictures and had to split up," Kokoro said.

“I-I imagine you got asked quite a lot with that cosplay of yours,” I commented, remembering how much she’d stood out among all the other cute cosplayers.

“Yeah, but I turned everyone down. I wanted to come back here as soon as I was done. And you said you wanted to come but then changed your mind. Why?”

“I-I thought I could help you find him, but you weren’t replying, so I figured you’d already met up with him.”

“Really? Aww, I wish you’d come! Finding him was super hard and approaching him was even harder!”

“But you managed it in the end.”

If I’d been there, maybe they wouldn’t have talked so much. Maybe they wouldn’t have exchanged LINE contacts at all. *Coming back was definitely the right decision.*

“Seriously though, his cosplay looked *amazing*! It was like seeing a real HypMic character right in front of my eyes!”

While I half listened to her rave about how handsome the guy was, my mind wandered. Kokoro’s quest for romance was going well, and since I’d been helping her out, I thought I’d be happy about it too. Then why did I feel so anxious... and *sad*, even?

I bet it’s because we’re rivals and I’m scared she’ll reach her goal before me... That’s it, yeah. That’s what I’m scared of.

6

It was already past noon, so we decided one of us would go to a convenience store to buy lunch for all of us. Since Kisaki and Kokoro could take care of the booth by themselves, I stepped up to go.

The store had mostly been emptied by the other attendees, so I only managed to buy a couple of rice balls and a few sandwiches. When I brought this bounty back, we took turns eating, sitting on the chair furthest away from the table.

As the crowd thinned and the number of customers decreased, Kisaki left the booth in my and Kokoro's hands for a few minutes to go meet some of her online friends.

When the clock was approaching half past one, Kisaki was back handing a doujinshi to another customer.

"Thank you so much!" my sister said, before pausing and murmuring to herself. "That was the last copy..."

"Really?! You mean you've sold out?!" I asked her.

Kisaki had quickly sold all twenty copybooks she had made, but what was more impressive was that she'd also managed to sell fifty of her bound doujinshi.

"That's amazing!" Kokoro congratulated her.

"Thank you. I can't believe it! I never thought I'd be able to sell all of them..."

"G-Good going," I said.

For a middle schooler publishing her first doujinshi, it was an incredible achievement.

Once we'd finished cleaning up our space, Kokoro suggested that we all go and enjoy the rest of the afternoon together.

“I don’t know if they’re still here,” she added, “but would you mind if I invited our friends?”

“You mean those girls who visited the booth earlier? Sure! Go ahead!” Kisaaki replied.

Friends? She means Iroha and Mikoto, surely, but... does that also include Minami? But she came to our booth so early that she’s probably already gone home...

“Oh, they replied! Awww, Iroha and Mikoto went home already... Oh! Minami said she was just leaving too, and that she’d love to come!”

“Minami... Is that the blonde girl?”

“Yep! That one!”

I can see her again... That means I’ll get another chance to have a proper conversation with her. But now that I think about it, didn’t Nishina already have plans for after Comiket?

“Hey, didn’t you say you wanted to meet that cosplayer guy after the event was over? Did you manage to invite him?” I asked her.

“I-I didn’t...” she replied, looking understandably disappointed.

“Why don’t you invite him now then? You exchanged LINE contacts, right?”

“What?! I can’t text him like that out of nowhere! We don’t know each other that well yet! I just can’t!” she objected, furiously shaking her head.

And to think she was planning to have dinner with him... Good luck with that, if you won’t even invite him.

“I’d sound totally desperate if I invited him right after he gave me his LINE!” she continued.

“Just tell him that you’re going out with some friends and ask him if he’d like him to come too.”

“W-Well... I guess that could work. But he was here with a friend too, and I wouldn’t wanna be a nuisance, you know? Like, I’d come across as super demanding...”

“Come on, Nishina. Don’t be a wimp. Just tell him a friend of yours wants to meet him or something. The worst that can happen is that he says no, right?”

Of course, if I were in her shoes, I’d be just as nervous about inviting my crush like that. That didn’t make her dilly-dallying any less infuriating though. It’d be a waste not to act when things were going so well, and, more importantly, I wanted to meet this Yuya guy in person myself. He looked harmless enough from his Twitter account, but you can’t judge a book by its cover.

“A friend of mine? Who, though?” Kokoro asked.

“Me, Kisaki, whoever. Just make something up. Tell him we saw a picture and want to see his cosplay in person,” I said, then I turned to my sister. “You do want to see him, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess I do...” she replied, glancing at me in a weird way. I could tell that she wanted to tell me something, but I couldn’t for the life of me guess what it was.

“Hmmm... Okay! I’ll do it!” Kokoro announced. “But first I have to ask Minami if she’s fine with it. Maybe she wouldn’t be able to come with a stranger there, you know, being a voice actress and all.”

She texted Elena, who quickly replied saying it wouldn’t be an issue. Then Kokoro started carefully crafting her next message to Yuya, writing, deleting, rewriting, and editing it for what felt like an eternity.

“This should do!” she finally said. “Listen to this: *‘Hello! Thank you so much for letting me take your picture today! Did you leave already? I’m about to go have dinner with some friends, and when I told one of them about you, they said they really wanna see your cosplay! Would you maybe like to come have dinner with us? If it’s not a hassle, that is!’*”

“Yeah, that sounds fine...” I said.

It sounded somewhat formal for Kokoro and like she was scared to death of offending him, but it was her first text, after all.

“Okay! Go! Ahhh! I sent it! Too late for regrets! If he says no, I’ll have to live with that!”

Once we'd finished packing up, we left the hall and headed toward the café where Elena was already waiting for us.

"Eeeek!" Kokoro squealed all of a sudden.

"Wh-What's wrong?!"

"H-He replied! He said he'd love to have dinner together! He's in a diner nearby with one of his friends, and he said he could save seats for us! Awaaah!"

"O-Oh, okay..." I said.

"That's nice of him!" Kisaki added.

Kokoro was obviously ecstatic that, against all odds, Yuya had accepted her invitation.

"Pinch me! This can't be reeeal!" she shrieked.

Even though I had been the one to suggest it in the first place, I wasn't quite sure how I should behave in what had become such a large group: me, Kokoro, Kisaki, Elena, Yuya, and Yuya's friend. I still didn't even know how to approach Elena, and I was going to have to watch Yuya's every move to decide whether I should give him my blessing.

So many people and most of them barely know each other... Maybe I should've kept my mouth shut.

"Hi, Minami! Sorry to keep you waiting!"

"Oh, hi! It's a pleasure to see you all."

When we finally reached Elena, my eyes met hers for a moment, but I wasn't sure what to say. I just gave her a polite nod. I was happy to see her again—we'd barely exchanged any words when I was at the booth—but I was also worried about how to actually interact with her.

"I'm totally sorry I invited other people you don't know... Are you sure it's okay?" Kokoro asked her.

"Of course, it's not a problem at all. Are they friends of yours?"

"They're not all *friends*, really... One of the guys is a cosplayer I kinda look up

to. He let me take his picture today... And there's his friend too."

"Oh, I see. Good luck, then."

"Huh?! Oh, haha..."

Elena already knew that Kokoro was looking for a boyfriend, and judging by this conversation, she'd already guessed that Kokoro had invited the guy because she had a crush on him.

After Kokoro made a brief trip to the restroom (she had to fix her hair and makeup), we all went to the diner where Yuya and his friend were waiting. On our way there, the three girls were so busy chatting among themselves that I was worried the day would end without me being able to speak to Elena at all.

"This should be the place," Kokoro said, stopping in front of the diner that Yuya had told her about. She didn't move a muscle, standing like a statue in front of the entrance.

"Oh, come ooon! Are you going in or not?" I asked her.

Kokoro was the only one who knew the cosplayer well enough to instantly recognize him, so she had to be the first to step inside.

"I-I'm going in!" she finally said, pushing open the door and walking up to a familiar face.

"H-Hello!" she said to Yuya.

"Oh, hey!" he replied.

This was my first chance to take a good, close-up look at him. He was, beyond any doubt, handsome. You could tell at a glance that he was a popular guy. Sitting across the table from him was his equally handsome friend, who was already busy eating.

I didn't like having to sit next to men who—unlike me—were good-looking, popular, and most likely extroverted. I was already regretting my suggestion.

As I looked at Yuya, I realized that he was very different from the other guys that Kokoro had so far described as handsome. Both Kusumi, who had worked with us at the maid café, and Bambi had more of a homely handsomeness. Sure, you wouldn't guess they were otaku, but once you knew that, you'd just

label them “handsome otaku” and call it a day.

This Yuya though... He was in another category altogether. Kokoro’s type were thin, smart-looking guys with black hair, and he looked nothing like that. He had quite a bit of muscle on him, his hair was much lighter in color, and all in all he looked like the kind of person I’d never be able to make friends with at school.

This guy is an otaku?! They make them like this?!

For some reason, he looked just as startled when he looked at me as I was looking at him. He quickly switched to a smile, but I was left feeling very confused.

“Please, have a seat!” he said, inviting Kokoro and the rest of us over to the four seats they’d saved for us.

“Th-Thank you!” she replied.

We sat down without thinking too much about who we were near, and I somehow ended up sitting right next to Yuya. I did think about swiftly moving to another seat, but Kokoro was already sitting on a chair in front of me. On her left was Yuya’s friend, and on her right was Kisaki. So I had the cosplayer on one side, and on the other... I had Elena.

Did she sit next to me by accident?

I cursed my own stupidity for picking a seat without thinking about it first. I couldn’t have chosen a more awkward place to sit. I had to keep an eye on Yuya, but I also wanted to have a conversation with Elena... Not to mention that I was worried about Kokoro and Kisaki. My roommate looked exceedingly nervous and my sister knew less than half the people there.

If it’d only been the four of us, speaking to Elena wouldn’t have felt this difficult. It *would* have still been difficult, granted, but not *this* much.

Those of us without food checked out the menu and placed our orders, and then Kokoro started speaking.

“S-So... Maybe I should introduce us! I’m Two-Heart, and I cosplay! Over there’s Ichigaya and Minami. We all go to the same school. And this is Ichigaya’s

little sister, Kisaki! Ichigaya and I are here to help her sell her doujinshi today.”

That stupid nickname again? I thought as I listened to the very anxious Kokoro. *She could at least just use “Heart” like she did when she worked as a maid...*

“O-Oh, so, I’m Yuya! This is my friend Masahiro from university. He’s cosplaying with me today,” Yuya said in a way that sounded polite, but also strangely nervous.

Huh, so he’s a university student...

“Awesome!” Masahiro said, turning immediately to Kokoro. “We were cosplaying Toppo and Hipumi from HypMic today, but I wasn’t around when Yuya got to see your cosplay, Two-Heart. Who’d you come as?”

This guy seemed much less polite than his friend—he looked like your standard-issue university student who parties a lot.

How? How did this guy turn into an otaku?!

“I-I was cosplaying Arimu from *IMS*...”

“Really?! I love Arimu! I *must* see a picture of your cosplay! Come on, you’ve gotta have a picture somewhere!”

Yup. Just the kind of guy I thought he was. He’s wasting no time going after Nishina. I wonder what she thinks of him...

“S-Sure, let me find one...” she replied, taking out her phone while looking tenser than ever.

“So you live in India?” a soft voice asked next to me.

“Yes! I came back to Japan for Comiket. By the way, I’ve heard you’re a voice actress!”

Kisaki and Elena, meanwhile, were already chatting with each other.

There goes the stereotype of otaku being too introverted to talk to strangers. Now I can’t speak to Minami—it’d be rude to butt into a conversation between two girls. Wait, does this mean I’m the only one being left out? I was worried about the girls, but it turns out I’m the one who’s having the hardest time...

Since Kisaki and Elena seemed to be doing more than fine, I decided to focus on Yuya to get a better sense of what kind of person he was.

“Cool! Your costume’s *amazing!*” Masahiro said—or yelled, rather—upon seeing Kokoro’s selfie.

“Th-Thank you...”

“May I see i—” Yuya started saying something, but he was interrupted by his friend.

“What other characters do you usually cosplay?” Masahiro asked.

“I, um... Unithorn from *Adore Lane*, Yumeno☆Saki—”

“Whoa! I wish I could see all of them! Actually, wait, I’ve got a better idea! We should cosplay together sometime!”

*Whoa yourself! Slow down there, buddy! The one she’s after is Yuya...
Dammit, I should’ve let Nishina sit next to him!*

“O-Oh! That’s a great idea! We could do a group cosplay!” Yuya timidly suggested.

“A group cosplay?! That’d be totally amazing!” Kokoro replied. Her twinkling eyes, however, were clearly aimed at Yuya, and not at Masahiro, who had originally proposed the idea. This was enough evidence to confirm that she wasn’t interested in the latter.

“Ah... What about you... Ichigaya, was it? Do you also cosplay?” Yuya asked me, possibly as a kind gesture, since I’d been completely cut out of the conversation.

“Huh? Me? N-No, not really...” I replied, shocked by how kind he was being to me, a boy and complete stranger. *He really is a good guy, I guess...*

“Oh, so you don’t cosplay with her?”

“Nah, we’re just, um, otaku friends who happen to go to the same school...”

“Oh, but that’s just as cool! Being friends with an otaku girl at school sounds amazing. So you’re an otaku but also popular with girls... I wish I were you!” he said.



Popular with girls? I wish I were you? What's this guy talking about? Is he making fun of me?! You're the popular one between the two of us!

"B-But surely you have lots of female friends, being in university and all," I replied. As I spoke, I realized that, a few short months ago, I would never have been able to say something like this to an older dude, let alone one so intimidatingly handsome. I owed this newfound courage to all the practice I'd gotten hanging around Kokoro: at work, meeting cute girls at events, and so on.

"Aw, not at all. It's all pretty much men on my course. You can count the girls on one hand."

"What? R-Really...?"

In my imagination, university had always been a place where boys and girls met and went drinking or partying together.

"Yeah, and my high school was a boys' school too. I'm kind of envious!"

"B-But you're friends with lots of female cosplayers, right?"

A guy this handsome must have swarms of girls coming after him. Just like Bambi did...

"Ah, you see, I'm new to this. This was my third event so far. I've exchanged business cards with other cosplayers a couple of times, but I haven't become friends with any of them yet."

So that thing about being a beginner on his Twitter profile was true...

It was then that I noticed our conversations were taking place between all the wrong people—Kokoro was still talking with Masahiro, while I spoke to her crush. Mr. Crush didn't seem to mind, however, and he continued talking.

"S-So, by the way... you and Two-Heart are otaku friends, right?" Yuya was still smiling, but I could hear the concern in his voice.

"Huh? Y-Yes..."

"That means that you two aren't... you know... dating?"

"What?! No, not at all!"

"I see..." he replied, looking slightly relieved.

It sounds like he's interested in Nishina! She might have a chance with him!

"Do you happen to know if she has a boyfriend...?"

"Huh?"

"I-I just thought it'd be wrong to invite her to cosplay together if she was seeing someone!"

Okay, she definitely has a chance with him!

"She doesn't! There's no problem inviting her whatsoever!"

"R-Really?!" he asked, a broad smile breaking out across his face.

"Actually, she doesn't have any other cosplayer friends, so she'd probably be happy if you asked her."

"Oh! That's great news! I-I'll invite her then! Why don't you come too? We could all cosplay together!"

"Me?! Haha... I don't have the confidence to cosplay..."

The more I spoke with Yuya, the more surprised I became. He said he didn't have any female friends, and that he hadn't had any in high school either. Seeing how he wasn't as forward as his friend in talking to Kokoro, he was likely telling the truth. He also spoke politely and respectfully to me, even though I was younger than him. In general, I had to admit that I liked him.

I thought back to that other handsome cosplayer I knew, Bambi, and the contrast between them was stark. Even though he'd tried to sound like a good guy, that handsome narcissist had been suspicious from the start. I didn't get any such vibes from Yuya.

Considering all of this, and the fact that he seemed more attracted to Kokoro than I could have ever imagined, he probably was the perfect otaku boyfriend that she had been looking for. He was handsome and an otaku, of course, but he was also kind. Not to mention that he didn't seem like he fooled around at all.

A man so perfect shouldn't be allowed to exist. He's perfect for Nishina. He has my blessing. I'll have to tell her about how much he seems to like her later on, and then it'll only be a matter of time before they start dating. Right...

Nishina will have a boyfriend. Why does that bother me so much? I should be happy about it! I can't explain this feeling... If it's not jealousy from being overtaken in our race to romance, then I really don't know what it is.

Eventually, our individual conversations merged into a collective one. We talked about Kisaki's doujinshi, Elena's work as a voice actress, and so on.

Masahiro was just as eager to talk to these two girls as he had been to talk with Kokoro, bombarding them with questions and compliments. This might have been his way of being polite, but then again, he wasn't even trying to talk to me. He probably just wanted to take his chances with all the girls he could find.

Despite the dude's advances, we had a surprising amount of fun, and we all continued talking until six o'clock.

"Oh, look at the time," Elena said after a glance at her watch. "I'm really sorry, but I have to go. I have a work appointment soon."

I was disappointed that, despite sitting next to her for so long, our meeting would end without us having spoken to each other. Even when everyone was telling her goodbye, speaking to her was so difficult that I only managed to wave her off.

"I'll go get my train then. The station is... over there, right?" she said, pointing in the exact opposite direction of the station.

I mean, we aren't that close to the station, but I thought she'd have at least some idea of where we are...

"No, it's that way!" Masahiro corrected her. "Guess it's probably better if I walk you to it!"

Wh-What?! This guy wants to go with her! He's definitely going to flirt with her or ask for her LINE or something! I have to do something!

"Ah! I just remembered I have to be going too! I'll walk you, don't worry about it!" I told Elena.

"R-Really...?" she asked, looking extremely confused.

“What? You’re going home already?” Kokoro asked.

“Yeah... I’ll text you two later,” I replied, feeling bad about my lousy lie.

“Okay then...” she said.

As Elena and I left, she and Kisaki stared after me with a mixture of suspicion and surprise.

When we could no longer see the diner, I finally apologized to Elena.

“I-I’m sorry I said I’d go back with you all of a sudden...”

“It’s not a problem, but is it true that you had to go?”

“W-Well...” I fumbled for words, knowing that, as awkward as it was, I had to tell her the truth. “Actually, I was worried about letting that guy go with you...”

I slowly turned to look at her, worried about how she was going to react. She was staring at me, looking stunned, until our eyes met and she quickly averted her gaze.

“Thank you,” she then said with the faintest voice possible. Even if she wasn’t looking straight at me anymore, I could tell that she was blushing.

Moments later, she stopped walking. This time, her voice was more determined when she spoke.

“Ichigaya?”

“Yes?” I said, stopping as well.

“The thing I told you last time...” she continued, and my heart skipped a beat. I noticed her eyes were getting wet with tears. “Please forget that I ever said it.”

“...Huh?” I couldn’t believe what I’d just heard.

“I was so grateful back then that, in the heat of the moment, I ended up saying what I did without considering that it’d be a nuisance to you... I’m sorry.”

“A nuisance? No way...”

She said it in the heat of the moment... So she didn’t really mean it?

“I meant everything I said that day,” she said as if she’d read my mind.

So... she does like me?

“But I know that you’re not attracted to me.”

“What?”

Why in the world would I not be attracted to Minami?!

“Wait...” I objected, but she had already started speaking.

“And I’d already told myself that I wouldn’t date anyone before becoming successful as a voice actress. I shouldn’t have bothered you in that way, and I’m sorry.”

Elena looked as if she could start crying any moment.

She didn’t want to date before becoming successful? But... wait a second. She basically just said that she likes me, right?! So she doesn’t want to date me because she’s only starting out as a voice actress?

I was having considerable trouble processing so many thoughts at once, but there was one thing that I knew for sure: nothing could make me happier than Elena liking me. All the same, the fact that she wouldn’t date me was extremely sad.

“I’m so sorry. I know I’ve asked a lot of you, and I promise not to be a nuisance anymore, but... would you do me one last favor?” she asked.

“One last favor?” I repeated. I wasn’t even able to come up with my own words anymore.

“Just once... would you please go on a date with me? Then I’ll give up on my feelings for you.” Elena looked at me, tears streaming down her face.

I hadn’t rejected her, nor had I been rejected by her. I actually hadn’t done anything at all. And now, hearing her request, there was only one way I could answer.

“If that’d make you happy... it’d be my pleasure.”

7

I felt like I was in a dream.

“Really? Thank you! Oh... I can reach the station by myself from here. I appreciate you walking me so far,” Elena said, trying to hide her tears behind a smile, then she turned and hurried to the station.

I stood there without a word, staring after her as she got away. All kinds of thoughts were swirling through my mind.

After who knows how long, my phone rang and my head came back down from the clouds. It was Kokoro.

“H-Hello...”

“Ichigaya? You said you’d text us! Did you really go back home?”

“Um... Minami went to the station, but I’m still standing here on the sidewalk...”

“Huh?! What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“It doesn’t matter. What about you two?”

“We just left the diner and are heading home. You haven’t caught the train yet, right? Then can you wait for us at Tokyo Big Sight Station?”

“Uh, sure.”

I hung up and went back to thinking about Elena. She’d basically confessed to me and somehow let me down at the same time.

I feel kind of hurt about this, so... does that mean I wanted to date her? Now that I think about it, I guess she is my ideal girlfriend. She’s beautiful, cute, she likes yuri just like me, and she voices my favorite VTuber. To top it all off, despite her popularity, she’s incredibly kind and caring.

Elena checked all the right boxes—she was perfect. The only reason I hadn’t

been considering her as a potential girlfriend was because I thought she only liked girls. I'd been sure that any love I might end up feeling for her would have been unrequited.

Now, however, I knew it had all been a misunderstanding. Elena had told me that she liked me, and I definitely liked her back. To be honest... if it was at all possible, I wanted her to become my girlfriend.

Too bad she said she doesn't want to date anyone before she's made it as a voice actress...

As an otaku, I knew how much fans disapproved of voice actors' romantic endeavors. An established name in the industry would have had some leeway, but a rookie like Elena had only just started gaining popularity since people found out she was the voice of Emily Saionji. I'd been keeping up with any news that involved her work, so I knew she'd recently scored a major role in an anime that would start airing in September. This was a deciding moment for her career, and dating meant exposing herself to the risk of being found out and ruining it all.

Elena's job was very important to her, and I understood that. If anything, as a fan, I wished for nothing more than her success. However, I couldn't help but feel disappointed. Regardless of what I thought, Elena had no plans to become my girlfriend.

"Oh, there he is!"

Kokoro and Kisaki reached me at the station, where I was waiting just like I'd been told to. The two guys from earlier were no longer with them.

"What happened?!" Kokoro demanded to know. "You said you had to go back, but you're still standing around..."

"Well... It just didn't feel safe letting that Masahiro guy walk Minami to the station..."

"Oooh, *that's* what it was? It got me kinda nervous too when he offered, to be honest."

"When the hell did *you* learn to be so chivalrous?" Kisaki asked me, surprised.

“I know, right? I totally never thought *Ichigaya* would go all ‘knight in shining armor’ like that!”

Do they think I’m some kind of spineless coward?!

“Anyway, where did those two go?” I asked them.

“They needed the Rinkai line,” Kokoro explained. The Rinkai line connected to the Yurikamome one, but you couldn’t access it from this station.

“Ah, I see...”

We kept talking as we passed through the ticket gates and headed toward our platform, but when I looked at Kokoro’s face, I noticed that the corners of her mouth were curled up ever so slightly.

“So, um... How did things go after Minami and I left?”

“Same way they were going before. Masahiro did enough talking for all four of us.”

I was relieved to find out that Kokoro didn’t think much of the guy either.

“But I still got to chat with Yuya quite a bit!”

“He looked pretty eager to talk to you too,” my sister commented, adding more fuel to Kokoro’s burning excitement.

“What?! F-For real?! We were talking about cosplaying together sometime, you know?! The only problem is that ‘we’ also includes Masahiro...”

It was no wonder Yuya looked eager to talk to my Kokoro—the guy was obviously head over heels for her. When we first met, he’d probably been staring at me so hard because he couldn’t figure out what exactly my relationship with her was. He’d been so anxious that he’d straight-out asked me in the diner whether she had a boyfriend. He’d also told me that he didn’t have many chances to make female friends, so it was a safe assumption to think that he was single.

“I think Yuya likes you,” I said.

“What?! A-Are you serious?! Why?!” she squawked at lightning speed.

I considered just telling her what I’d heard from him, but I felt so salty about

how well things were going for her that I dodged the question entirely.

“He just... kinda does?”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?!”

At this rate, I bet they’re going to end up together. From what I could gather during our short conversation, he seems like a decent guy, and he likes her too. A handsome otaku who likes girls’ stuff like HypMic... He’s her ideal boyfriend. I can’t believe a guy so perfect for her even exists. It’s just a matter of time. We’ve been helping each other along the road for months... and now she’s going to reach her goal first.

When we were finally on the train home, Kisaki hooked her arm with Kokoro’s.

“You know, those friends of yours that visited today were all so cute! I could hardly believe it!”

She was probably referring to Elena, Iroha, and Mikoto. All three of them were definitely attractive, even though the latter two negated that benefit by having such annoying personalities.

“I guess beautiful people attract other beautiful people...” my sister continued, staring intently at Kokoro.

“Hey,” Kokoro said, laughing from the embarrassment. “What’s the flattery for?”

“Well, it wouldn’t have surprised me so much if they were just friends of yours... but my brother was speaking with all those pretty girls like it was nothing! I thought I was dreaming or something!”

“Is that really so surprising?” I asked.

“Of course it is! The Kagetora I remember could barely speak to any female unless it was me or Mom!”

That Kagetora guy must be one sad fellow, huh? She’s right though...

“Ohhh. He’s improved a ton since then,” Kokoro said, sounding just as impressed.

“I bet it’s all thanks to you! It must be!” Kisasi confidently declared. “I’m not sure how it happened, but becoming friends with someone as gorgeous and extroverted as you must have helped him get used to talking to girls! And that’s how he managed to make new friends. Am I right?”

Kokoro was silent, as if unsure how to process what my sister was saying.

“W-Well,” I replied for her, “I guess you are...”

“I knew it! Thank you so much, Kokoro!”

* * *

Back at home, we poured ourselves some juice to celebrate a successful Comiket.

“To Kisasi selling out at her first event! Congratulations!” Kokoro said, raising her glass. This tiny celebration had been her idea, since we still hadn’t had the time to properly congratulate Kisasi. Doing so at the diner, with those two guys sitting with us, would have been kind of weird.

“Thank you! Now I can go back to India without any regrets!”

“Actually,” I added, remembering I had something to ask her, “are you going to stay here for your whole summer vacation? You never said when your flight back is.”

“Oh, it’s tomorrow.”

“WHAT?!” Kokoro and I exclaimed in unison.

“I have some things I need to take care of back home, and I don’t want Mom and Dad to worry about me. Oh, by the way, they told me to check on you and report back how you’re doing. So I was going to let them know...” Kisasi paused for a second, leaving me terribly anxious. “I’m going to tell them that you’re doing just fine.”

“Oh... P-Please do,” I replied, exhaling with relief.

“Awww, but I don’t wanna say goodbye already,” Kokoro whined. “You’d better message me on LINE after you go back!”

“Yes, of course! And I’d love to meet up with you again when I move back to

Japan permanently!”

Huh, so they exchanged LINE contacts...

Since this was going to be our last night together, we decided to all play some *Merry-Go-Kart* together on Kisaki’s Extendo Snitch. It was my first time in two years playing video games with my sister, and although I didn’t admit it, that made me really happy.

“Oh, my phone’s ringing... Sorry, go ahead without me for a second,” Kokoro said after a while, leaving the room and closing the door behind her. Kisaki and I were left alone with each other.

“Okay, I’ll be Joadette next!”

“Say, Kageitora...”

“Hm?”

“Are you... okay with that? You know, with Kokoro dating that cosplayer...”

“What...?” I mumbled, so shocked that my fingers froze in place on the controller.

“Don’t you feel anything for her?”

Where did that come from all of a sudden? Feel anything for... Nishina?

“I-I really... I’m not so...”

To me, Kokoro was my roommate, my ally, and my rival. I’d seen her struggle in her attempts to find a boyfriend for so long that I really wished for her to finally succeed... Or did I? I couldn’t deny that I had mixed feelings about the whole thing.

“I’m ba— Hm? Why aren’t you two playing? Were you waiting for me?” Kokoro came back into the living room sooner than I’d expected.

“Yeah! Let’s all play together!” Kisaki replied as if nothing had happened, and we went back to our kart racing.

Does Kisaki see something that I can’t see?

* * *

After a few too many rounds of *Merry-Go-Kart*, I went and took a bath. I checked my phone as soon as I was out of the bathroom and was thrilled to see a text from Elena.

"I'm so sorry I bothered you again today! I don't want you to feel forced to accept, so you can still say no if you don't want to."

I took a seat on the couch and hurriedly typed my response.

"I'd never say no to that! As long as you want to, I'm more than happy to go on a date with you!"

"You're always so kind..."

I wasn't being kind—I wanted to go on a date with her as much as she did with me.

"Is there anywhere special you'd like to go? Anywhere you like is fine!" I told her.

"Then... would Akihabara be okay?"

"Of course!"

"I want to see if they sell any Emily merchandise at Animate. I've never gone to check because I was scared somebody might recognize me."

"That sounds great! I want to go too!"

And so we decided that, a week from that day, Elena and I would go on a date together in Akihabara.

"Oh, finished up already?" Kokoro asked as she came into the living room. She walked through into the kitchen and poured herself some barley tea from the fridge.

"Yeah..."

"What's that grin for?" she asked, looking at me with disgust.

Was I grinning that hard? I didn't even notice.

I still hadn't told Kokoro about what had happened between me and Elena. I wanted my roommate's opinion on it, but I couldn't reveal how Elena had

confessed to me without having to explain how I already knew about her secret identity. Going through that whole story would have been a hassle, and I didn't have Elena's permission to talk about it anyway.

"Hellooo? Earth to Ichigaya!"

"I-It's nothing really..."

"Sheesh! It's so annoying when you make out like something's happening and then you don't explain!"

Make out like something's happening?! I haven't said anything! But... I guess I shouldn't keep this from her. She's telling me all about her romantic situation, so I guess I owe it to her.

"Well, actually..."

I mustered up the courage and finally told her the whole story: how Elena had said that she liked me, how she'd said that she didn't want a boyfriend yet, and how she'd asked me to go on a date with her. I somehow managed to avoid the topic of how I already knew about Elena's VTubing.

"...so we're going on a date next week."

"Wh... What...?" Kokoro murmured to herself, looking down at the floor. I didn't know what to make of such a reaction. I could have sworn that she looked... angry.

"Why didn't you tell me?! Why'd you keep something so important a secret for so long?!"

"I..."

The fierce glare that I received made it very clear that Kokoro was, indeed, angry. I knew that I should've told her sooner, but I definitely wasn't expecting her to take it so badly.

"I just never got the chance..."

"Aren't we supposed to be working together?! I always tell you everything! I feel so dumb right now!"

"But—"

“It’s like I’m just a dumb girl, always asking for your help! And you... You! You go ahead and get things done all by yourself! You don’t even need me...”

“N-Nishina...?” I was extremely confused. I just couldn’t understand why she was *that* furious.

All of a sudden, Kokoro stopped shouting and gave me an apologetic look.

“I... S-Sorry. I don’t know what got into me...”

Huh? She doesn’t even know why she’s angry? What’s her problem?

“I-I’m sorry too. I wanted to tell you, but with all that’s happened recently I never found the time...”

She remained silent for a while, making me concerned about just how upset she was.

“So,” she eventually said, “Minami likes you, but she won’t become your girlfriend, right? Because she decided not to date until her career takes off.”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“I’m still shocked that she had those kinds of feelings for you. I never noticed. Why would she...?”

“Is that really so surprising?”

To be honest, I was just as shocked as she was, but having it said to my face was pretty infuriating. At least Kokoro’s anger had subsided and she seemed to be back to normal.

“So, um... do you know where you’ll go for your date?”

“Yeah. We’re going to go to the Animate in Akihabara.”

“Akihabara? Won’t people recognize her now that she’s a well-known VTuber and voice actress?”

“I guess she’ll be wearing a mask like she did at Comiket.”

I was so excited about the date that I hadn’t even thought about that. Now, however, was a very important moment in Elena’s career, which required us to take the utmost care.

“You’d better keep your voice down while you’re at Animate. And if you go to a café or something like that, you should choose a place that isn’t too popular with otaku.”

Is she... giving me advice?

“Oh, you have a point. But what kind of place would that even be?”

“You go to Akihabara that much and you don’t even know?”

“How could I? I only go there for otaku-related stuff...”

“Huh, I guess that makes sense.”

Much to my surprise, Kokoro took out her phone and started searching for a suitable place to eat. I hadn’t expected her to help me out at all after seeing how harsh her initial reaction had been.

“What about this? Most girls love pancakes!” she said, showing me a web page with pictures of a fancy café serving equally fancy pancakes. “It’s not that close to the station either, so there’s probably not much of an otaku crowd,” she added.

“Ohhh, that sounds great! Can you send me the link?”

“Sure...” Kokoro paused, thinking quietly for a few moments before looking up at me and asking, “So, uh... if Minami had asked you to be her boyfriend, how would you have replied?”

My heart skipped a beat.

Minami asking me to be her boyfriend? Well, I...

“You know what, never mind. I’m sleepy. I’ll go to bed.”

“Huh?! O-Okay...”

“Good night.”

“G-Good night...”

Why would she ask me something like that and then leave before I could even answer?

The next day, Kokoro and I went to Narita airport to see Kisasi off.

“Have a good flight! We should sooo meet up again when you’re back!”

“Of course! Thanks for everything, Kokoro!”

“Be careful, all right?” I added.

“Sure. And *you* be careful not to be a nuisance to Kokoro, you hear me?”

“Huh?”

“Hah... I wish you two would hurry up and date each other already...”

“WHAT?!” Kokoro and I cried.

“Wh-What did you just...?”

“Wh-What are you talking about?!”

“It’s just that it’d be so much fun for me too... I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that! You’d never want to date someone like my brother, I bet! You’d be wasted on him!”

I braced for Kokoro’s reply, expecting her to agree with Kisasi... but she didn’t say anything.

“Oh, I have to get going! Bye bye, see you soon!” my sister said, waving as she left the two of us to our shock.

The awkwardness was palpable.

“Should we... go back home?”

“Y-Yeah...”

Nishina... date me? Is Kisasi blind? Didn’t she see the kind of guy that Nishina’s into?

8

A few days later, I was standing in front of the mirror, checking how I looked.

“Good.”

Hair’s good. Outfit’s good. Eyebrows are good.

I heard Kokoro yawn as she walked into the living room, still wearing her pajamas. It was pretty late in the day to wake up, even considering that we were still in the middle of summer vacation.

“Huh? What’s the deal?” she asked, surprised. “You look all fancy...”

“My date with Minami. It’s today.”

“Ohhh, that explains it. Hmmm...” she said, eyeing me from top to bottom. “You look okay, I guess. Anyway, this date of yours is just so she can find some kind of closure, right?”

“Yeah, that’s the idea.”

“Even then, you... Actually, no. Precisely because of that, you have to be the best date you can! Try to be Minami’s perfect otaku boyfriend for a day!”

“How am I even supposed to do that?”

“Just put her above all else and be as nice and gentlemanly as possible!”

“Oh, okay! That makes sense!”

Even if it was going to be our first and last date together, I wanted Elena to come out of it happy and impressed, so I decided to keep Kokoro’s advice in mind.

“See ya later then...” she said. “Do your best.”

“I will! Later!”

I left the house and walked nervously to the station, where I caught the train to Akihabara. On my way there, I thought about how different things would have been if Elena weren’t a voice actress. Maybe we could have even become

boyfriend and girlfriend. The more I thought about it, the sadder I felt.

I guess I really do like her a lot. But if she wasn't so serious about her career, she wouldn't be the Minami I know. I'd better stop wasting my time thinking about this impossible scenario.

I reached the Electric Town station exit right before 1 p.m. Elena was already there waiting for me. She was wearing a hat and a pair of glasses to hide her identity, but a girl that pretty was impossible to miss.

"Sorry to keep you waiting!"

"Oh, Ichigaya! Thank you so much for coming!" she said with a huge smile.

"Not at all!"

"Is this weird?" she asked, pointing at her hat. "I know I may be going overboard, but you know, since I'll be looking at Emily merchandise..."

"It's not weird at all. You can't be too careful!"

It wouldn't have been too much of an issue if she were by herself, but being seen in Akihabara with a guy would only cause her trouble. Maybe we were worrying over nothing, since very few people knew what she looked like, but we were better safe than sorry.

"Let's go then!"

"O-Okay..."

Is it me or does she have a lot more pep than usual? It's almost as if she's faking it to hide the fact that she's actually sad... I hope I'm just imagining things.

"So, Animate, was it?"

"Yes!"

"I go there a lot, so I'll show you the way."

"Thank you!"

We left the station and headed into the town's main street, toward Animate.

“Wow! Look at that billboard! O-Oh! There’s a maid!”

Elena was moving her head left and right, reacting to every new sight in the cutest way possible.

“I don’t have any friends that can come here with me, so I’ve actually not been to Akihabara much,” she explained.

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah... So, again, thank you for coming with me!”

“Don’t mention it! I’d be happy...”

...to come here with you whenever you want. That’s what I wanted to say—but I didn’t. After all, this was our first and last date.

When we reached Animate, Elena started excitedly going through all the magazines she could find.

“Look! It’s *Yuri Princess*! And this one is about VTubers!”

Seeing her having so much fun was lovely, but between the way she looked and how well her voice carried, I was worried that someone would notice her and find out who she was.

“Wh-Why don’t we go and look at the VTuber merchandise upstairs?” I suggested.

“Great idea!” she replied, and we immediately headed up there—taking the stairs, just to be safe.

Since all VTuber-related products were on this floor, we were obviously more likely to run into a VTuber fan.

I’ll have to stop her if she gets too enthusiastic... I think the ideal boyfriend that Nishina was talking about would do something like that out of concern for his girlfriend.

Despite my fears, Elena already understood that she had to contain herself. Her face radiated pure delight, but she remained silent as she walked through the shelves, acting as normal as possible.

It wasn’t long before we reached the Emily Saionji corner. There were

keychains, notebooks, towels—more merchandise than for any other VTuber. She'd recently seen a spike in followers, and it was now safe to say that she was one of Japan's top VTubers.

Elena looked at the shelves, smiling, without actually taking anything off of them. When she was done, she turned to me, beaming.

"Thank you so much! I'm so happy I was able to see it in person!" she said. "It" obviously referred to Emily's merchandise, but Elena wisely refrained from saying that aloud.

"I know. Cool, isn't it?"

"While we're here... would it be okay if we took a look at the other floors?"

"Of course!"

The next floor that she stopped at was packed with doujinshi.

Does she want to buy a yuri magazine or something?

"Wow," she said, marveling at the stacks of books, "I knew they sold doujinshi here, but seeing it with my own two eyes is incredible! Would you mind if I picked up a few things?"

"Didn't you already buy a bunch of doujinshi at Comiket?"

"I did, but I only bought the ones I already knew I wanted to get. Today, I just want to browse to see what I can find."

"Oh, of course. I don't mind..."

I followed Elena through the store's doujinshi section and watched her pick up books from the VTuber corner. She then headed over to the cashier with a pile of them in her arms, including some that starred Emily Saionji.

"Um, Minami?"

"Yes?"

"Maybe I should buy those for you."

"What...?"

"It's not that likely, but if the store clerk knows about Emily, he could end up

recognizing you.”

In the worst-case scenario, the clerk, knowing that Elena was the voice actress that voiced Emily, could post something about her being on a date in Akihabara and shopping for doujinshi with a boy. That would be terrible.

“Th-Thank you!” she said, handing me her wallet and the doujinshi she’d chosen. A quick glance confirmed my suspicion—they were all yuri stories.

Once I was done at the checkout, I went back to Elena and handed over her stuff.

“I hadn’t even considered how risky that could be... Thank you so much.”

“I could just be worrying too much,” I said.

“Not at all! I’m really grateful!”

“You bought some Emily doujinshi, didn’t you?”

“Oh, yes! I found one that pairs her up with Bunny Bellhop, so I absolutely had to get it!”



“Is that... okay with you?”

Bunny Bellhop was a VTuber that sometimes made videos with Emily. Elena had also mentioned that they were real-life friends. As a fan, the idea that she would even read a doujinshi like that was all kinds of exciting, but at the same time, it did sound a bit weird.

Wouldn't reading that kind of story about yourself be super awkward?

“Hm? Why wouldn't it be?” she asked as if the question made no sense to her. I decided not to press the matter further.

So long as she's fine with it...

“I had so much fun in there!” Elena said as we left the shop soon after, dazzling me with a contagious smile.

“I'm glad to hear! Now, as for where to go next...” I began, sneakily gauging her reaction as I took out my phone. She looked slightly surprised. “Wh-Why don't we go and eat something together? If that's cool with you, of course.”

I didn't know if Elena was planning to go anywhere else, but just visiting Animate and calling it a day would have made for a very underwhelming date.

“R-Really?” she stammered, unable to hide her shock. “Shopping with you already made me so happy. I wasn't expecting you to propose that we do something else together. I... I'd love to!”

She's such a sweet girl...

“Great! What about this place?” I asked as I showed her a photo of the pancake café that Kokoro had told me about. “It's a bit of a ways away from Electric Town, so we shouldn't have to worry about anyone recognizing you.”

“Y-You even went through the trouble of looking up a place beforehand?!”

“It wasn't that much trouble to be honest...”

I wasn't the one that looked it up in the first place.

“It looks wonderful! Yes! Let's go, please!”

We headed toward the café, guided by my phone's GPS. Along the way, I tried

to keep in mind what Kokoro had told me about being gentlemanly to Elena. I matched my walking pace to hers and tried not to choose any topics that could make her uncomfortable. I was trying my best, but I had absolutely no idea whether I was succeeding.

“Is this the place? It’s so cute!” Elena commented once we reached the pancake shop.

The decor was indeed very cute—I would have never chosen a place like that if I wasn’t accompanied by a girl.

She ordered a sweet pancake with berries and ice cream, and I got a savory one with eggs and sausages.

“This café is lovely! And to think that you chose it for me... I’m so grateful!”

“No, really, don’t mention it...” I replied, feeling slightly ashamed at being thanked for something that Kokoro had planned. At the same time, though, I knew to thank her later for helping me choose a date location that Elena looked so happy about.

Our orders soon arrived at the table, sparking Elena’s excitement once more.

“Awww, it’s so cute!” she said, taking a picture of her pancake. She then put her phone down to look at me. “Y-You know... this really feels like... a date.”

The sheer beauty of her glowing smile and blushing cheeks was nothing short of breathtaking.

“W-Well, this *is* a date, right?”

“Hehe, I guess you could say that. You even took me out to eat, as if it were a *real* date. I couldn’t be any happier than I am right now.”

Seeing Elena enjoy herself like this was exactly what I wanted; however, the more fun I had on this date, the sadder I became. I’d never get to go on another one with her.

As we continued enjoying our pancakes, the topic of conversation turned to VTubers. I suggested that we try not to use any recognizable names and refrain from saying anything that would cause too much trouble if we were heard. Even if we weren’t in the heart of Akihabara anymore, lowering our guard would

have been too much of a risk.

“Thank you for being so considerate! I’m nowhere near careful enough, so you’ve helped me a lot,” Elena said.

“By the way, I noticed you’ve been uploading more videos where you sing and dance lately. You’re unbelievably talented, Minami.”

“Thanks! I actually took dance lessons as a kid.”

We talked about anime, gacha games, Comiket, and all other kinds of otaku stuff. Being able to talk about my hobbies with a girl that understood them was a wonderful feeling. If you also considered how pretty she looked, how cute her voice was, and the fact that she was a voice actress, there was nothing else to conclude other than that she was the perfect otaku girlfriend. I was confident that ten out of ten otaku guys would agree.

Elena and I even talked about Kokoro and Kisaki. Despite having chatted for almost two hours, though, time had raced by in the blink of an eye. One minute we were sitting down to eat, and the next we were paying the bill and leaving the café.

“I can’t thank you enough for today,” she told me as we were ready to part ways at the station.

“Not at all! I should be the one thanking you!”

“You? Thanking me? Why...?”

“Huh? Because I had so much fun...”

“It’s so kind of you to say that... I wish I could stop time so this day could last forever. I was able to go to Animate and shop for doujinshi there like I’ve wanted for so long, then you even took me to that wonderful café. Chatting with you like that was so pleasant... It was perfect. I couldn’t have wished for a better date.”

“M-Me t—”

Before I could tell Elena how much I’d also enjoyed our date, I noticed a couple of men standing staring at us... or rather, at Elena. They were too far away to have heard us, but it looked like they’d recognized her.

“Mina...” I began to say, but decided halfway through that saying her name out loud wouldn’t be a good idea. “Why don’t we go for one last walk before going home?”

“Hm?” She looked at me, confused, having not seen the two men. I needed a better excuse.

“I heard that there’s, um, a location from the ‘*Dove Dive!*’ anime here in Akihabara, and I wanted to take a look. Would you come with me?” I asked, remembering how I’d been there with Ai once.

I feared that my sudden suggestion would only weird her out, but Elena grinned even harder.

“Really?! I’d love to see it!”

“Okay then, it’s this way,” I said, leading her out of the station as I tried to lose the two creepy men. Rude as this was, I walked in front of her, and pretty fast at that, without saying a single word.

The men were still watching Elena as we left the station, but they didn’t follow us.

Those guys were probably huge fans of Elena... Well, fans of Emily. The average viewer wouldn’t know what her face actually looked like. If they spread the news that Elena was on a date at Akihabara, that could ruin her career...

Once I was sure that they couldn’t see us anymore, I slowed down and started chatting with her again.

“This must be it!” she said when we reached a small square in front of a bridge.

“That’s right! It was only used once, and the place isn’t that memorable or anything, so maybe you can’t remember it...”

“I think I do! It’s the scene where they’re sitting on the bench talking to each other, right?”

“Yes, that one!”

Elena took out her phone and looked up screenshots of that scene, comparing them to the real thing.

“Wow! It’s exactly the same!” she said, impressed, before taking a bunch of pictures.

Since we were already there, we decided to rest on the same bench that the characters in the anime had used.

“This was already the best date ever, but you somehow managed to make it even better...” she said, smiling, much to my relief. “I’ve always wanted to visit a place from one of my favorite anime!”

“Actually, you might not have seen them, but... there were two men looking at you in the station.”

“There were?”

As I’d suspected, she had no idea.

“I wanted to get you out of there as soon as possible, so I kind of dragged you all the way here. I’m sorry. I didn’t want them to see which train you caught and find out where you live,” I explained.

Voice actress fans, VTuber fans, idol fans... they were all a scary lot. Some of them had recently made the news for finding an idol’s address after seeing a station reflected in her eyes on a selfie.

“I-I hadn’t noticed at all! Thank you...” she said, looking more relieved than offended. “You saved me again.”

“Aw, no. ‘Saved’ is an overstatement.”

“No, I really mean it. All throughout today you’ve been so careful to keep my identity safe. I can’t thank you enough.” She looked honestly moved, and I was happy to see that she’d noticed my efforts.

“Don’t mention it. I was just worried they’d tweet about seeing us together. At least they didn’t seem to be taking pictures, so I think we’re okay.”

“I guess they could have still posted something online. Would you mind if I checked?” Elena asked.

“Go ahead!” I said.

Elena fired up Twitter as I waited anxiously.

“Ah...!”

“Did you find something?!”

Please don't tell me I just caused Emily Saionji's first scandal...

“Look,” she said, showing me the screen.

Just saw this blonde girl who looked so much like Elena Nanjo that I couldn't stop staring...

Elena Nanjo? That's her voice-acting name. Also, if this guy's saying that she “looked so much like her,” then he mustn't have been convinced that it actually was her...

I'd been scared for a second, but thankfully we'd avoided the danger.

“I looked up my voice-acting name and Emily's name, but this is the only recent tweet. I also checked the user's timeline, but this is the only time he mentions me,” she said.

I sighed with relief.

“I should probably check the image boards too,” she added.

“Good idea!”

“Hmmm... Nothing's coming up.”

“But that's great!”

It was still possible that the people who saw her would post about her later on, but we seemed to be safe, at least for now.

“Who knows what would have happened if you hadn't noticed and led me out of there. Thank you! You've looked after me for the whole day... Actually, you always do that. I feel like you're always there for me when I need help. You listened to my work troubles, you gave me advice, you cheered me up when people found out my identity...”

“O-Oh, but it's nothing...”

Being thanked so much warmed my heart, but also made me feel kind of embarrassed. Every time Elena said something like that, I became overwhelmed by how sweet she was.

“You know though...” I said, flustered. “You’ve become rather famous, huh? You’re pretty much a celebrity at this point.”

Elena had always been popular at school, but this was on a whole different scale. Since it’d come to light that she was the voice of Emily Saionji, she’d been all VTuber fans could talk about. I felt honored to have someone like that as a friend.

Well, even if it all ends today, she said she likes me. But we’ll never go on a date again. We can never be together...

“You’re incredible, honestly,” I told her. “I really respect you for how much effort you put into your work.”

“I-I’m just...”

All prospects of my potential romance with her had been nipped in the bud, which made me so sad that all the things I’d always thought about her suddenly came pouring from my mouth. I couldn’t control myself.

“We share the same hobbies, otaku ones, which is already rare enough for a girl. You’re so kind and gentle and... y-you’re really... my dream girl...”

Could a girl better than her even exist?

“I—”

“I know how you feel. I respect you so much for your work ethic, and I know that this is a crucial moment in your career. I don’t want to put you in a tight spot. I really don’t, but... Minami?”

I paused as I noticed the tears that had begun to well up in her eyes.



“I’m sorry, Ichigaya... I can’t. I just can’t give up on you...”

“What?”

Elena slowly raised her head and looked straight at me.

“I like you. I love you. Can I be your girlfriend?”

There was no room for doubt this time. Elena had confessed her love to me. It was as simple as that.

She... loves me? She wants to be my girlfriend? Is she being serious? Am I dreaming?

The feelings that had been brewing within me for so long boiled over all at once.

* * *

“Hi.”

When I got back home, Kokoro was sitting on the couch, watching TV.

“Hey.”

Didn’t she go out at all today? That’s rare for her.

“I made dinner, but you already ate, didn’t you?” she asked me. It was my turn to cook, but since I wouldn’t be home, we’d agreed that I didn’t have to worry about it today.

Weird that she’d cook though. She must have been really bored or something...

“Really? I had a pancake earlier, but I’m probably going to get hungry later on, so I’ll eat again in a while.”

I went to the bathroom to wash my hands as Kokoro spoke to me from the living room.

“So, how’d your date go?”

I was expecting that question, but not this soon.

“W-Well...”

I sat down on the couch next to her, strangely nervous.

“We... Minami and I... became boyfriend and girlfriend,” I admitted, doing my best to sound as calm as possible.

Kokoro was sure to be surprised by that—I was still surprised myself.

When Elena had asked me if she could become my girlfriend, I’d obviously said yes. She’d always been my ideal girl, and going on a date with her had made me like her even more. Her confession had filled me with joy, and I’d gladly accepted it.

Nishina won’t even believe it, I bet...

“What...? A-Are you serious?” Kokoro asked, staring at me in disbelief. It was a much different kind of surprise from the one I’d been expecting. “D-Didn’t she tell you that she didn’t want a boyfriend? Didn’t she say that she just wanted to go on this one date?”



“Yeah, but... right before going back home, she told me that she couldn’t give up on me and asked to become my girlfriend.”

Kokoro lowered her head and stared at the floor.

Huh? I thought she’d be happy to see me succeed after so long. What’s with this reaction? Does she have a problem with it? If so, I wish she’d at least tell me. I really can’t tell what she’s thinking right now...

All of a sudden, Kokoro’s phone started vibrating. It was a call.

She got up and left the living room, answering it as she did so.

“...Hello?”

I was left alone, sitting by myself on the couch in awe.

For the first time in my life, I had a girlfriend. This was already reason enough to celebrate, but the girlfriend in question was a great one by anyone’s standards. In all honesty, she was completely out of my league.

Despite all this... I couldn’t help but feel weird about Kokoro’s reaction.

What’s wrong with her? We’ve worked together all this time. We helped each other out. Why isn’t she happy? Why won’t she congratulate me?

After what seemed like an eternity, Kokoro came back. She was frowning, but it seemed to be about something else.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“I think... I’ll be moving out next month.”

Wha...?

“WHAT?!” I yelled, thrown for a loop by the unexpected news.

Wh-What does this mean?! Why?!

Afterword

Rin Murakami here! It's been a while.

Thank you for reading the fourth volume of *Guide to the Perfect Otaku Girlfriend*!

Reaching this point in the series took surprisingly little time, and I want to thank all my readers for their continued support that has allowed me to keep working on it in the first place.

Thank you so much!

Lately, I've been spending my days doing yoga, watching theater plays with my friends, and streaming Western movies—not exactly otaku hobbies. To make up for that, I religiously check Twitter to understand new trends and ask my otaku friends about them.

On top of that, I've been busy looking for a new home, since I plan on moving out of my parents' place soon. I'd like to live in a fashionable city, but my bank account may not agree with that decision.

Just before I started writing this afterword, the place where I live was hit by a record-breaking typhoon. All the predictions had me terrified. I was ready at any time if push came to shove, but thankfully it went by with relatively little harm. All of my sympathy goes to those who were hit by the typhoon.

Let's talk about this volume and its main topic: Comiket. I actually attended for the first time in a while to help refresh my memory... and it was *harsh*. I'm too old for that kind of thing. I met some friends, checked out the cosplayers, and barely had any time left for shopping. That being said, I'm happy I was able to experience the Comiket atmosphere after so long.

I've never been to Comiket as part of a circle myself—I've only done so at smaller events—but I once helped out with a friend's circle. I based that part of the story on my own experiences. The circle ticket really was a godsend. Just

like Kagetora and Kokoro, even though I was there to help sell doujinshi, I also wanted to pick up a few things myself, and not having to line up made all the difference.

Making a last-minute copybook despite already having a professionally printed volume was also something that I experienced personally back in the day. I remember how passionate I felt, how nervous I was about whether we'd be able to sell anything, and how overwhelmingly happy I was when we actually did, especially when customers bought something without even checking inside it because it was already on their wish list. With Kisaki's help, I vicariously relived all those emotions. Oh, those were the days! Now I can't even imagine being in love with a series to the point of trying to publish a derivative work.

Since this time around I have more space than usual to write this afterword, I'd like to talk a little bit about the characters.

First of all, there's Kagetora, our protagonist. He's probably the character who most closely resembles me, and I often think back to my own high school self when writing about him. The only problem is that with every passing day I get farther and farther away from being a high school student...

Then there's Kokoro. When coming up with her, I got inspiration from a real fujoshi friend of mine. Oh, and she's a gyaru because... I like gyaru, in case it wasn't obvious from my other works. Otaku gyaru are actually more common than one would think.

Our second heroine is Elena. While working on a different light novel, I remember how the editor noticed that none of my characters were half-Japanese, so I've made it a point to include someone like that in all of my works since. (My debut novel also has a half-Japanese character show up in the latter half, by the way...)

I wanted each of the girls to have their own distinct personality and hobbies, and so, while Kokoro is a cosplayer, Elena is a voice actress.

And although she didn't get much time in the spotlight in this volume, I can't forget about Mashiro. I wanted her to be the most devious, attention-craving, two-faced otaku girl possible, and since I love that archetype, writing her lines now that she's dropped her act is always a lot of fun.

Iroha and Mikoto appeared in this volume, but, being secondary characters, they never really get the chance to shine. Iroha has a lot of quirks I like: she's caustic, she wears that flashy Harajuku style, and she sports twintails. This kind of character was a first for me, which made it all the more fun.

Mikoto was born because of a rumor I heard about slightly older heroines being all the rage. I also thought that the idea of a girl wanting to wear frilly dresses despite having reached an age where people wouldn't approve of it was very cute. She isn't the first older character to appear in one of my novels, but since I wanted to make her completely new, I gave her a slightly rougher personality. I may have accidentally made her a bit too obnoxious...

Seeing Mako Tatekawa's illustrations for our two side characters really blew me away. Not only did they look exactly like what I'd had in mind, but the characters themselves and even their outfits were a lot more charming than anything I could have imagined!

Another heroine with very little to do in this volume is Yume. She's based on the simple concept that a girl's obsessive love is cute. Once again, Mako Tatekawa's design for her was so cute that dating her started sounding like a good proposition despite her scary personality.

Finally, this volume saw the first appearance of Kisaki, Kagetora's little sister. She's my idea of the perfect little sister—cute with a side of impertinence. Needless to say, Tatekawa knocked it out of the park with her too, making her both adorable and fashionable. Being able to publish your work and having people enjoy it while you're still in middle school is a huge accomplishment. I would know, since the stuff I used to write in middle school was terrible.

I get the feeling that the next volume will be a huge climax, and I hope you'll stick around to see what happens to each of the characters.

Finally, I want to thank my editor for providing me with useful advice volume after volume—and apologize for all the trouble I give you!

At the risk of repeating myself, thank you Mako Tatekawa for the wonderful illustrations. The cover's summer outfit is the cutest thing ever, and I absolutely love Kokoro's cosplay illustration at the start of the volume.

Last but certainly not least, I want to thank you, the readers, for following Kageatora and his friends through yet another book.

See you in volume five!

Rin Murakami



4

I'M **HAPPY**
TO KNOW THERE'S
SOMEONE AT HOME
WAITING FOR ME.

GUIDE
TO THE
PERFECT
OTAKU
GIRLFRIEND
ROOMIES
AND
ROMANCE

CHARACTER

**KAGETORA
ICHIGAYA**

An unapologetic otaku who lives with Kokoro while in search of his ideal girlfriend. Kagetora will be helping his sister sell doujinshi at Comiket.



ROOM-MATES

**KOKORO
NISHINA**

A gyaru and secret otaku who lives with Kagetora while in search of her ideal boyfriend. Kokoro plans to meet up with a cosplayer she likes at Comiket.



**ELENA
MINAMI-
WILLIAMS**

Kagetora and Kokoro's younger schoolmate. Elena secretly works as a voice actress and voices VTuber "Emily Saionji." She recently confessed her love to Kagetora.



**MASHIRO
GOJO**

An otaku girl working at the Meow'd Maid Café. Mashiro's sweet facade hides a rough personality.



**TAKESHI
AISAKI**

Kagetora's friend and classmate. Ai leans into his natural cuteness by cosplaying female characters.



YUME

An introverted girl who works at the fairy-tale themed Maid-Tale Café. There is something off-puttingly dark about Yume.



IROHA

A mischievous gyaru who started working at the Meow'd Maid Café at the same time as Kagetora. Iroha still chats with Kokoro from time to time.



MIKOTO

An office worker who started a part-time job at the Meow'd Maid Café while hiding her real age. Mikoto wishes she was as young as her friends.





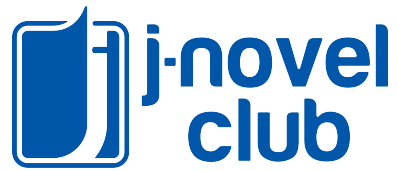
Kisaki

"MY BROTHER'S LOOKING FOR A GIRL-FRIEND? EW..."

KISAKI ICHIGAYA

Kagetora's fashionable and extroverted younger sister. Kisaki and her brother grew apart from each other, so he's yet to discover that she's a bona fide otaku and fujoshi manga artist.





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Guide to the Perfect Otaku Girlfriend: Roomies and Romance Volume 4

by Rin Murakami

Translated by Marco Godano Edited by Stephanie Buck

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